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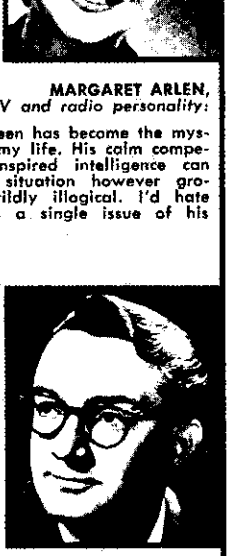

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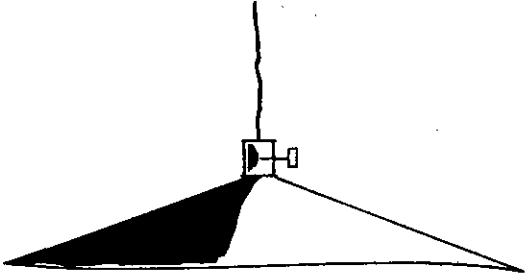

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Not many detective-story writers have had the honor of being "profiled" in the sophisticated pages of "The New Yorker" — we remember those of Rex Stout, John Dickson Carr, and Georges Simenon. Sometimes there is no recognizable likeness to the "sitter" — as in the case of John Dickson Carr; sometimes the portrait bears a closer resemblance to the original — as in the case of Rex Stout. But "New Yorker" profiles are notoriously "impressionistic," and some hypersensitive writers, still hanging on desperately to their more important principles, might easily choose to sacrifice the "publicity" rather than submit to a word-distortion of their character, work habits, and deeper aims. It is not true, as a modern adage claims, that "any publicity is good publicity;" nor is it true, or even kind to the "subject," that a gagged-up, wisecracking profile in a national magazine is better than no profile at all. In simple justice to "The New Yorker," however, it is only fair to add that the Simenon profile seemed to delineate the man and his work with more than the usual "New Yorker" fidelity . . .

Now we bring you the first appearance in English of a new Inspector Maigret story — a tale of the great manhunter and his understanding wife and what happened to them on Christmas Day and how, contrary to his usual methods, Maigret did most of his sleuthing from the depths of his easy chair, while sipping Alsatian plum brandy and smoking his inevitable pipe. This new Maigret story, with its authentic picture of French middle-class life, with its remarkable blend of good will toward the good and ruthless persecution of the bad, is a major literary event for mystery fans.

MAIGRET'S CHRISTMAS;

or, The Girl Who Believed in Santa Claus

by GEORGES SIMENON

(translated by Lawrence G. Blochman)

THE ROUTINE NEVER VARIED. WHEN Maigret went to bed he must have muttered his usual, "Tomorrow morning I shall sleep late." And Mme. Maigret, who over the years should have learned to pay no attention to such casual phrases, had taken him at his word this Christmas day.

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It was not quite daylight when he heard her stirring cautiously. He forced himself to breathe regularly and deeply as though he were still asleep. It was like a game. She inched toward the edge of the bed with animal stealth, pausing after each movement to make sure she had not awakened him. He waited anxiously for the inevitable finale, the moment when the bedspring, relieved of her weight, would spring back into place with a faint sigh.

She picked up her clothing from the chair and turned the knob of the bathroom door so slowly that it seemed to take an eternity. It was not until she had reached the distant fastness of the kitchen that she resumed her normal movements.

Maigret had fallen asleep again. Not deeply, nor for long. Long enough, however, for a confused and disturbing dream. Waking, he could not remember what it was, but he knew it was disturbing because he still felt vaguely uneasy.

The crack between the window drapes which never quite closed became a strip of pale, hard daylight. He waited a while longer, lying on his back with his eyes open, savoring the fragrance of fresh coffee. Then he heard the apartment door open and close, and he knew that Mme. Maigret was hurrying downstairs to buy him hot *croissants* from the bakery at the corner of the Rue Amelot.

He never ate in the morning. His breakfast consisted of black coffee. But his wife clung to her ritual: on Sundays and holidays he was supposed to lie in bed until mid-morning while she went out for *croissants*.

He got up, stepped into his slippers, put on his dressing gown, and drew the curtains. He knew he was doing wrong. His wife would be heart-broken. But while he was willing to make almost any sacrifice to please her, he simply could not stay in bed longer than he felt like it.

It was not snowing. It was nonsense, of course, for a man past 50 to be disappointed because there was no snow on Christmas morning; but then middle-aged people never have as much sense as young folks sometimes imagine.

A dirty, turbid sky hung low over the roofstops. The Boulevard Richard-Lenoir was completely deserted. The words *Fils et Cie.*, *Bonded Warehouses* on the sign above the porte-cochére across the street stood out as black as mourning crêpe. The *F*, for some strange reason, seemed particularly dismal.

He heard his wife moving about in the kitchen again. She came into the dining room on tiptoe, as though he were still asleep instead of looking out the window. He glanced at his watch on the night table. It was only ten past 8.

The night before the Maigrets had gone to the theatre. They would have loved dropping in for a snack at some restaurant, like everyone else on Christmas Eve, but all tables were reserved for *Réveillon* supper. So they had walked home arm in arm, get-

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ting in a few minutes before midnight. Thus they hadn't long to wait before exchanging presents.

He got a pipe, as usual. Her present was an electric coffee pot, the latest model that she had wanted so much, and, not to break with tradition, a dozen finely embroidered handkerchiefs.

Still looking out the window, Maigret absently filled his new pipe. The shutters were still closed on some of the windows across the boulevard. Not many people were up. Here and there a light burned in a window, probably left by children who had leaped out of bed at the crack of dawn to rush for their presents under the Christmas tree.

In the quiet Maigret apartment the morning promised to be a lazy one for just the two of them. Maigret would loiter in his dressing gown until quite late. He would not even shave. He would dawdle in the kitchen, talking to his wife while she put the lunch on the stove. Just the two of them.

He wasn't sad exactly, but his dream — which he couldn't remember — had left him jumpy. Or perhaps it wasn't his dream. Perhaps it was Christmas. He had to be extra-careful on Christmas Day, careful of his words, the way Mme. Maigret had been careful of her movements in getting out of bed. Her nerves, too, were especially sensitive on Christmas.

Oh, well, why think of all that? He would just be careful to say nothing untoward. He would be careful not to look out of the window when the neighborhood children began to appear on the sidewalks with their Christmas toys.

All the houses in the street had children. Or almost all. The street would soon echo to the shrill blast of toy horns, the roll of toy drums, and the crack of toy pistols. The little girls were probably already cradling their new dolls.

A few years ago he had proposed more or less at random: "Why don't we take a little trip for Christmas?"

"Where?" she had replied with her infallible common sense.

Where, indeed? Whom would they visit? They had no relatives except her sister who lived too far away. And why spend Christmas in some second-rate country inn, or at a hotel in some strange town?

Oh, well, he'd feel better after he had his coffee. He was never at his best until he'd drunk his first cup of coffee and lit his first pipe.

Just as he was reaching for the knob, the door opened noiselessly and Mme. Maigret appeared carrying a tray. She looked at the empty bed, then turned her disappointed eyes upon her husband. She was on the verge of tears.

"You got up!" She looked as though she had been up for hours herself, every hair in place, a picture of neatness in her crisp clean apron. "And I was so happy about serving your breakfast in bed."

He had tried a hundred times, as

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subtly as he could, to make her understand that he didn't like eating breakfast in bed. It made him uncomfortable. It made him feel like an invalid or a senile old gaffer. But for Mme. Maigret breakfast in bed was the symbol of leisure and luxury, the ideal way to start Sunday or a holiday.

"Don't you want to go back to bed?"

No, he did not. Decidedly not. He hadn't the courage.

"Then come to breakfast in the kitchen. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas! . . . You're not angry?"

They were in the dining room. He surveyed the silver tray on a corner of the table, the steaming cup of coffee, the golden-brown *croissants*. He put down his pipe and ate a *croissant* to please his wife, but he remained standing, looking out the window.

"It's snowing."

It wasn't real snow. It was a fine white dust sifting down from the sky, but it reminded Maigret that when he was a small boy he used to stick out his tongue to lick up a few of the tiny flakes.

His gaze focused on the entrance to the building across the street, next door to the warehouse. Two women had just come out, both bareheaded. One of them, a blonde of about 30, had thrown a coat over her shoulders without stopping to slip her arms into the sleeves. The other, a brunette, older and thinner, was hugging a shawl.

The blonde seemed to hesitate, ready to turn back. Her slim little companion was insistent and Maigret had the impression that she was pointing up toward his window. The appearance of the concierge in the doorway behind them seemed to tip the scales in favor of the little brunette. The blonde looked back apprehensively, then crossed the street.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing . . . two women. . . ."

"What are they doing?"

"I think they're coming here."

The two women had stopped in the middle of the street and were looking up in the direction of the Maigret apartment.

"I hope they're not coming here to bother you on Christmas Day. My housework's not even done." Nobody would have guessed it. There wasn't a speck of dust on any of the polished furniture. "Are you sure they're coming here?"

"We'll soon find out."

To be on the safe side, he went to comb his hair, brush his teeth, and splash a little water on his face. He was still in his room, relighting his pipe, when he heard the doorbell. Mme. Maigret was evidently putting up a strong hedgehog defense, for it was some time before she came for him.

"They insist on speaking to you," she whispered. "They claim it's very important and they need advice. I know one of them."

"Which one?"

"The skinny little one, Mlle. Don-

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coeur. She lives across the street on the same floor as ours. She's a very nice person and she does embroidery for a firm in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. I sometimes wonder if she isn't in love with you."

"Why?"

"Because she works near the window, and when you leave the house in the morning she sometimes gets up to watch you go down the street."

"How old is she?"

"Forty-five to fifty. Aren't you getting dressed?"

Doesn't a man have the right to lounge in his dressing gown, even if people come to bother him at 8:30 on Christmas morning? Well, he'd compromise. He'd put his trousers on underneath the robe.

The two women were standing when he walked into the dining room.

"Excuse me, mesdames . . ."

Perhaps Mme. Maigret was right. Mlle. Doncoeur did not blush; she paled, smiled, lost her smile, smiled again. She opened her mouth to speak but said nothing.

The blonde, on the other hand, was perfectly composed. She said with a touch of humor: "Coming here wasn't my idea."

"Would you sit down, please?"

Maigret noticed that the blonde was wearing a house dress under her coat and that her legs were bare. Mlle. Doncoeur was dressed as though for church.

"You perhaps wonder at our boldness in coming to you like this," Mlle. Doncoeur said finally, choosing her words carefully. "Like everyone in the neighborhood, we are honored to have such a distinguished neighbor. . . ." She paused, blushed, and stared at the tray. "We're keeping you from your breakfast."

"I've finished. I'm at your service."

"Something happened in our building last night, or rather this morning, which was so unusual that I felt it was our duty to speak to you about it immediately. Madame Martin did not want to disturb you, but I told her —"

"You also live across the street, Madame Martin?"

"Yes, Monsieur." Madame Martin was obviously unhappy at being forced to take this step. Mlle. Doncoeur, however, was now fully wound up.

"We live on the same floor, just across from your windows." She blushed again, as if she were making a confession. "Monsieur Martin is often out of town, which is natural enough since he is a traveling salesman. For the past two months their little girl has been in bed, as a result of a silly accident. . . ."

Maigret turned politely to the blonde. "You have a daughter?"

"Well, not a daughter exactly. She's our niece. Her mother died two years ago and she's been living with us ever since. The girl broke her leg on the stairs. She should have been up and about after six weeks, but there were complications."

"Your husband is on the road at present?"

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"He should be in Bergerac."

"I'm listening, Mlle. Doncoeur."

Mme. Maigret had detoured through the bathroom to regain the kitchen. The clatter of pots and pans had resumed. Maigret stared through the window at the leaden sky.

"I got up early this morning as usual," said Mlle. Doncoeur, "to go to first mass."

"And you did go to church?"

"Yes. I stayed for three masses. I got home about 7:30 and prepared my breakfast. You may have seen the light in my window."

Maigret's gesture indicated he had not been watching.

"I was in a hurry to take a few goodies to Colette. It's very sad for a child to spend Christmas in bed. Colette is Madame Martin's niece."

"How old is she?"

"Seven. Isn't that right, Madame Martin?"

"She'll be seven in January."

"So at 8 o'clock I knocked at the door of their apartment —"

"I wasn't up," the blonde interrupted. "I sometimes sleep rather late."

"As I was saying, I knocked. Madame Martin kept me waiting for a moment while she slipped on her négligée. I had my arms full, and I asked if I could take my presents in to Colette."

Maigret noted that the blonde was making a mental inventory of the apartment, stopping occasionally to dart a sharp, suspicious glance in his direction.

"We opened the door to her room together. . . ."

"The child has a room of her own?"

"Yes. There are two bedrooms in the apartment, a dressing room, a kitchen, and a dining room. But I must tell you — No, I'm getting ahead of myself. We had just opened the door and since the room was dark, Madame Martin had switched on the light . . ."

"Colette was awake?"

"Yes. It was easy to see she'd been awake for some time, waiting. You know how children are on Christmas morning. If she could use her legs, she would certainly have got up long since to see what Father Christmas had brought her. Perhaps another child would have called out. But Colette is already a little lady. She's much older than her age. She thinks a lot."

Now Madame Martin was looking out the window. Maigret tried to guess which apartment was hers. It must be the last one to the right, the one with the two lighted windows.

"I wished her a Merry Christmas," Mlle. Doncoeur continued. "I said to her, and these were my exact words, 'Darling, look what Father Christmas left in my apartment for you.'"

Madame Martin was clasping and unclasping her fingers.

"And do you know what she answered me, without even looking to see what I'd brought? They were only trifles, anyhow. She said, 'I saw him.'

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" 'Whom did you see?'

" 'Father Christmas.'

" 'When did you see him?' I asked. 'Where?'

" 'Right here, last night. He came to my room.'

"That's exactly what she said, isn't it, Madame Martin? With any other child, we would have smiled. But as I told you, Colette is already a little lady. She doesn't joke. I said, 'How could you see him, since it was dark?'

" 'He had a light.'

" 'You mean he turned on the electricity?'

" 'No. He had a flashlight. Look, Mama Loraine.'

"I must tell you that the little girl calls Madame Martin 'Mama,' which is natural enough, since her own mother is dead and Madame Martin has been taking her place."

The monologue had become a confused buzzing in Maigret's ears. He had not drunk his second cup of coffee and his pipe had gone out. He asked without conviction: "Did she really see someone?"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Inspecteur. And that's why I insisted that Madame Martin come to speak to you. Colette did see someone and she proved it to us. With a sly little smile she threw back the bedsheet and showed us a magnificent doll . . . a beautiful big doll she was cuddling and which I swear was not in the house yesterday."

"You didn't give your niece a doll, Madame Martin?"

"I was going to give her one, but mine was not nearly as nice. I got it yesterday afternoon at the Galeries, and I was holding it behind me this morning when we came into her room."

"In other words, someone *did* come into your apartment last night?"

"That's not all," said Mlle. Doncoeur quickly; she was not to be stopped. "Colette never tells lies. She's not a child who imagines things. And when we questioned her, she said the man was certainly Father Christmas because he wore a white beard and a bright red coat."

"At what time did she wake up?"

"She doesn't know — sometime during the night. She opened her eyes because she thought she saw a light. And there was a light, shining on the floor near the fireplace."

"I can't understand it," sighed Madame Martin. "Unless my husband has some explanation . . ."

But Mlle. Doncoeur was not to be diverted from her story. It was obvious that she was the one who had questioned the child, just as she was the one who had thought of Maigret. She resumed:

"Colette said, 'Father Christmas was squatting on the floor, and he was bending over, as though he were working at something.' "

"She wasn't frightened?"

"No. She just watched him. This morning she told us he was busy making a hole in the floor. She thought he wanted to go through the floor to visit the people downstairs — that's the Delormes who have a little boy of

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three — because the chimney was too narrow. The man must have sensed she was watching him, because he got up, came over to the bed, and gave Colette the big doll. Then he put his finger to his lips."

"Did she see him leave?"

"Yes."

"Through the floor?"

"No, by the door."

"Into what room does this door open?"

"Directly into the outside hall. There is another door that opens into the apartment, but the hall door is like a private entrance because the room used to be rented separately."

"Wasn't the door locked?"

"Of course," Madame Martin intervened. "I wouldn't let the child sleep in a room that wasn't locked from the outside."

"Then the door was forced?"

"Probably. I don't know. Mlle. Doncoeur immediately suggested we come to see you."

"Did you find a hole in the floor?"

Madame Martin shrugged wearily, but Mlle. Doncoeur answered for her.

"Not a hole exactly, but you could see that the floor boards had been moved."

"Tell me, Madame Martin, have you any idea what might have been hidden under the flooring?"

"No, Monsieur."

"How long have you lived in this apartment?"

"Since my marriage, five years ago."

"And this room was part of the apartment then?"

"Yes."

"You know who lived there before you?"

"My husband. He's 38. He was 33 when we were married, and he had his own furniture then. He liked to have his own home to come back to when he returned to Paris from the road."

"Do you think he might have wanted to surprise Colette?"

"He is six or seven hundred kilometers from here."

"Where did you say?"

"In Bergerac. His itinerary is planned in advance and he rarely deviates from his schedule."

"For what firm does he travel?"

"He covers the central and southwest territory for Zenith watches. It's an important line, as you probably know. He has a very good job."

"There isn't a finer man on earth!" exclaimed Mlle. Doncoeur. She blushed, then added, "Except you, Monsieur l'Inspecteur."

"As I understand it then, someone got into your apartment last night disguised as Father Christmas."

"According to the little girl."

"Didn't you hear anything? Is your room far from the little girl's?"

"There's the dining room between us."

"Don't you leave the connecting doors open at night?"

"It isn't necessary. Colette is not afraid, and as a rule she never wakes up. If she wants anything, she has a little bell on her night table."

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"Did you go out last night?"

"I did not, Monsieur l'Inspecteur." Madame Martin was annoyed.

"Did you receive visitors?"

"I do not receive visitors while my husband is away."

Maigret glanced at Mlle. Doncoeur whose expression did not change. So Madame Martin was telling the truth.

"Did you go to bed late?"

"I read until midnight. As soon as the radio played *Minuit, Chrétiens,* I went to bed."

"And you heard nothing unusual?"

"Nothing."

"Have you asked the concierge if she clicked the latch to let in any strangers last night?"

"I asked her," Mlle. Doncoeur volunteered. "She says she didn't."

"And you found nothing missing from your apartment this morning, Madame Martin? Nothing disturbed in the dining room?"

"No."

"Who is with the little girl now?"

"No one. She's used to staying alone. I can't be at home all day. I have marketing to do, errands to run. . . ."

"I understand. You told me Colette is an orphan?"

"Her mother is dead."

"So her father is living. Where is he?"

"Her father's name is Paul Martin. He's my husband's brother. As to telling you where he is —" Madame Martin sketched a vague gesture.

"When did you see him last?"

"About a month ago. A little longer. It was around All Saints' Day. He was finishing a novena."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I may as well tell you everything at once," said Madame Martin with a faint smile, "since we seem to be washing our family linen." She glanced reproachfully at Mlle. Doncoeur. "My brother-in-law, especially since he lost his wife, is not quite respectable."

"What do you mean exactly?"

"He drinks. He always drank a little, but he never used to get into trouble. He had a good job with a furniture store in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. But since the accident . . ."

"The accident to his daughter?"

"No, to his wife. He borrowed a car from a friend one Sunday about three years ago and took his wife and little girl to the country. They had lunch at a roadside inn near Mantes-la-Jolie and he drank too much white wine. He sang most of the way back to Paris — until he ran into something near the Bougival bridge. His wife was killed instantly. He cracked his own skull and it's a miracle he's still alive. Colette escaped without a scratch. Paul hasn't been a man since then. We've practically adopted the little girl. He comes to see her occasionally when he's sober. Then he starts over again. . . ."

"Do you know where he lives?"

Another vague gesture. "Everywhere. We've seen him loitering around the Bastille like a beggar.

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Sometimes he sells papers in the street. I can speak freely in front of Mlle. Doncoeur because unfortunately the whole house knows about him."

"Don't you think he might have dressed up as Father Christmas to call on his daughter?"

"That's what I told Mlle. Doncoeur, but she insisted on coming to see you anyhow."

"Because I see no reason for him to take up the flooring," said Mlle. Doncoeur acidly.

"Or perhaps your husband returned to Paris unexpectedly. . . ."

"It's certainly something of the sort. I'm not at all disturbed. But Mlle. Doncoeur —"

Decidedly Madame Martin had not crossed the boulevard light-heartedly.

"Do you know where your husband might be staying in Bergerac?"

"Yes. At the Hotel de Bordeaux."

"You hadn't thought of telephoning him?"

"We have no phone. There's only one in the house — the people on the second floor, and they hate to be disturbed."

"Would you object to my calling the Hotel de Bordeaux?"

Madame Martin started to nod, then hesitated. "He'll think something terrible has happened."

"You can speak to him yourself."

"He's not used to my phoning him on the road."

"You'd rather he not know what's happening?"

"That's not so. I'll talk to him if you like."

Maigret picked up the phone and placed the call. Ten minutes later he was connected with the Hotel de Bordeaux in Bergerac. He passed the instrument to Madame Martin.

"Hello. . . . Monsieur Martin, please. . . . Yes, Monsieur Jean Martin. . . . No matter. Wake him up."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "He's still asleep. They've gone to call him."

Then she retreated into silence, evidently rehearsing the words she was to speak to her husband.

"Hello? . . . . Hello, darling. . . . What? . . . Yes, Merry Christmas! . . . Yes, everything's all right. . . . Colette is fine. . . . No, that's not why I phoned. . . . No, no, no! Nothing's wrong. Please don't worry!" She repeated each word separately. "Please . . . don't . . . worry! I just want to tell you about a strange thing that happened last night. Somebody dressed up like Father Christmas and came into Colette's room. . . . No, no! He didn't hurt her. He gave her a big doll. . . . Yes, *doll!* . . . And he did queer things to the floor. He removed two boards which he put back in a hurry. . . . Mlle. Doncoeur thought I should report it to the police inspector who lives across the street. I'm there now. . . . You don't understand? Neither do I. . . . You want me to put him on?" She passed the instrument to Maigret. "He wants to speak to you."

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A warm masculine voice came over the wire, the voice of an anxious, puzzled man.

"Are you sure my wife and the little girl are all right? . . . It's all so incredible! If it were just the doll, I might suspect my brother. Loraine will tell you about him. Loraine is my wife. Ask her. . . . But he wouldn't have removed the flooring. . . . Do you think I'd better come home? I can get a train for Paris at three this afternoon. . . . What? . . . Thank you so much. It's good to know you'll look out for them."

Loraine Martin took back the phone.

"See, darling? The inspector says there's no danger. It would be foolish to break your trip now. It might spoil your chances of being transferred permanently to Paris. . . ."

Mlle. Doncoeur was watching her closely and there was little tenderness in the spinster's eyes.

". . . I promise to wire you or phone you if there's anything new. . . . She's playing quietly with her new doll. . . . No, I haven't had time yet to give her your present. I'll go right home and do it now."

Madame Martin hung up and declared: "You see." Then, after a pause, "Forgive me for bothering you. It's really not my fault. I'm sure this is all the work of some practical joker . . . unless it's my brother-in-law. When he's been drinking there's no telling what he might do."

"Do you expect to see him today? Don't you think he might want to see his daughter?"

"That depends. If he's been drinking, no. He's very careful never to come around in that condition."

"May I have your permission to come over and talk with Colette a little later?"

"I see no reason why you shouldn't — if you think it worthwhile. . . ."

"Thank you, Monsieur Maigret!" exclaimed Mlle. Doncoeur. Her expression was half grateful, half conspiratorial. "She's such an interesting child! You'll see!"

She backed toward the door.

A few minutes later Maigret watched the two women cross the boulevard. Mlle. Doncoeur, close on the heels of Madame Martin, turned to look up at the windows of the Maigret apartment.

Mme. Maigret opened the kitchen door, flooding the dining room with the aroma of browning onions. She asked gently:

"Are you happy?"

He pretended not to understand. Luckily he had been too busy to think much about the middle-aged couple who had nobody to make a fuss over this Christmas morning.

It was time for him to shave and call on Colette.

He was just about to lather his face when he decided to make a phone call. He didn't bother with his dressing gown. Clad only in pajamas, he dropped into the easy chair by the window — *his* chair — and

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watched the smoke curling up from all the chimney pots while his call went through.

The ringing at the other end — in headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres — had a different sound from all other rings. It evoked for him the long empty corridors, the vacant offices, the operator stuck with holiday duty at the switchboard. . . . Then he heard the operator call Lucas with the words: "The boss wants you."

He felt a little like one of his wife's friends who could imagine no greater joy — which she experienced daily — than lying in bed all morning, with her windows closed and curtains drawn, and telephoning all her friends, one after the other. By the soft glow of her night-light she managed to maintain a constant state of just having awakened. "What? Ten o'clock already? How's the weather? Is it raining? Have you been out yet? Have you done all your marketing?" And as she established telephonic connection with the hurly-burly of the workaday world, she would sink more and more voluptuously into the warm softness of her bed.

"That you, Chief?"

Maigret, too, felt a need for contact with the working world. He wanted to ask Lucas who was on duty with him, what they were doing, how the shop looked on this Christmas morning.

"Nothing new? Not too busy?"

"Nothing to speak of. Routine. . . ."

"I'd like you to get me some information. You can probably do this by phone. First of all, I want a list of all convicts released from prison the last two or three months."

"Which prison?"

"All prisons. But don't bother with any who haven't served at least five years. Then check and see if any of them has ever lived on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Got that?"

"I'm making notes."

Lucas was probably somewhat bewildered but he would never admit it.

"Another thing. I want you to locate a man named Paul Martin, a drunk, no fixed address, who frequently hangs out around the Place de la Bastille. I don't want him arrested. I don't want him molested. I just want to know where he spent Christmas Eve. The commissariats should help you on this one."

No use trying. Maigret simply could not reproduce the idle mood of his wife's friend. On the contrary, it embarrassed him to be lolling at home in his pajamas, unshaven, phoning from his favorite easy chair, looking out at a scene of complete peace and quiet in which there was no movement except the smoke curling up from the chimney-pots, while at the other end of the wire good old Lucas had been on duty since six in the morning and was probably already unwrapping his sandwiches.

"That's not quite all, old man. I want you to call Bergerac long distance. There's a traveling salesman by the name of Jean Martin staying at the Hotel de Bordeaux there. No,

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Jean. It's his brother. I want to know if Jean Martin got a telegram or a phone call from Paris last night or any time yesterday. And while you're about it, find out where he spent Christmas Eve. I think that's all."

"Shall I call you back?"

"Not right away. I've got to go out for a while. I'll call you when I get home."

"Something happen in your neighborhood?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe."

Mme. Maigret came into the bathroom to talk to him while he finished dressing. He did not put on his overcoat. The smoke curling slowly upward from so many chimney pots blended with the gray of the sky and conjured up the image of just as many overheated apartments, cramped rooms in which he would not be invited to make himself at home. He refused to be uncomfortable. He would put on his hat to cross the boulevard, and that was all.

The building across the way was very much like the one he lived in — old but clean, a little dreary, particularly on a drab December morning. He avoided stopping at the concierge's lodge, but noted she watched him with some annoyance. Doors opened silently as he climbed the stairs. He heard whispering, the padding of slippered feet.

Mlle. Doncoeur, who had doubtless been watching for him, was waiting on the fourth floor landing. She was both shy and excited, as if keeping a secret tryst with a lover.

"This way, Monsieur Maigret. She went out a little while ago."

He frowned, and she noted the fact.

"I told her that you were coming and that she had better wait for you, but she said she had not done her marketing yesterday and that there was nothing in the house. She said all the stores would be closed if she waited too long. Come in."

She had opened the door into Madame Martin's dining room, a small, rather dark room which was clean and tidy.

"I'm looking after the little girl until she comes back. I told Colette that you were coming to see her, and she is delighted. I've spoken to her about you. She's only afraid you might take back her doll."

"When did Madame Martin decide to go out?"

"As soon as we came back across the street, she started dressing."

"Did she dress completely?"

"I don't understand."

"I mean, I suppose she dresses differently when she goes downtown than when she merely goes shopping in the neighborhood."

"She was quite dressed up. She put on her hat and gloves. And she carried her shopping bag."

Before going to see Colette, Maigret stepped into the kitchen and glanced at the breakfast dishes.

"Did she eat before you came to see me?"

"No. I didn't give her a chance."

"And when she came back?"

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"She just made herself a cup of black coffee. I fixed breakfast for Colette while Madame Martin got dressed."

There was a larder on the ledge of the window looking out on the courtyard. Maigret carefully examined its contents: butter, eggs, vegetables, some cold meat. He found two uncut loaves of fresh bread in the kitchen cupboard. Colette had eaten *croissants* with her hot chocolate.

"How well do you know Madame Martin?"

"We're neighbors, aren't we? And I've seen more of her since Colette has been in bed. She often asks me to keep an eye on the little girl when she goes out."

"Does she go out much?"

"Not very often. Just for her marketing."

Maigret tried to analyze the curious impression he had had on entering the apartment. There was something in the atmosphere that disturbed him, something about the arrangement of the furniture, the special kind of neatness that prevailed, even the smell of the place. As he followed Mlle. Doncoeur into the dining room, he thought he knew what it was.

Madame Martin had told him that her husband had lived in this apartment before their marriage. And even though Madame Martin had lived there for five years, it had remained a bachelor's apartment. He pointed to the two enlarged photographs standing on opposite ends of the mantelpiece.

"Who are they?"

"Monsieur Martin's father and mother."

"Doesn't Madame Martin have photos of her own parents about?"

"I've never heard her speak of them. I suppose she's an orphan."

Even the bedroom was without the feminine touch. He opened a closet. Next to the neat rows of masculine clothing, the woman's clothes were hanging, mostly severely tailored suits and conservative dresses. He did not open the bureau drawers but he was sure they did not contain the usual trinkets and knickknacks that women collect.

"Mademoiselle Doncoeur!" called a calm little voice.

"Let's talk to Colette," said Maigret.

The child's room was as austere and cold as the others. The little girl lay in a bed too large for her, her face solemn, her eyes questioning but trusting.

"Are you the inspector, Monsieur?"

"I'm the inspector, my girl. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. Hasn't Mama Loraine come home yet?"

Maigret pursed his lips. The Martins had practically adopted their niece, yet the child said "Mama Loraine," not just "Mama."

"Do you believe it was Father Christmas who came to see me last night?" Colette asked Maigret.

"I'm sure it was."

"Mama Loraine doesn't believe it. She never believes me."

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The girl had a dainty, attractive little face, with very bright eyes that stared at Maigret with level persistence. The plaster cast which sheathed one leg all the way to the hip made a thick bulge under the blankets.

Mlle. Doncoeur hovered in the doorway, evidently anxious to leave the inspector alone with the girl. She said: "I must run home for a moment to make sure my lunch isn't burning."

Maigret sat down beside the bed, wondering how to go about questioning the girl.

"Do you love Mama Loraine very much?" he began.

"Yes, Monsieur." She replied without hesitation and without enthusiasm.

"And your papa?"

"Which one? Because I have two papas, you know — Papa Paul and Papa Jean."

"Has it been a long time since you saw Papa Paul?"

"I don't remember. Perhaps several weeks. He promised to bring me a toy for Christmas, but he hasn't come yet. He must be sick."

"Is he often sick?"

"Yes, often. When he's sick he doesn't come to see me."

"And your Papa Jean?"

"He's away on a trip, but he'll be back for New Year's. Maybe then he'll be appointed to the Paris office and won't have to go away any more. That would make him very happy and me, too."

"Do many of your friends come to see you since you've been in bed?"

"What friends? The girls in school don't know where I live. Or maybe they know but their parents don't let them come alone."

"What about Mama Loraine's friends? Or your papa's?"

"Nobody comes, ever."

"Ever? Are you sure?"

"Only the man to read the gas meter, or for the electricity. I can hear them, because the door is almost always open. I recognize their voices. Once a man came and I didn't recognize his voice. Or twice."

"How long ago was that?"

"The first time was the day after my accident. I remember because the doctor just left."

"Who was it?"

"I didn't see him. He knocked at the other door. I heard him talking and then Mama Loraine came and closed my door. They talked for quite a while but I couldn't hear very well. Afterward Mama Loraine said it was a man who wanted to sell her some insurance. I don't know what that is."

"And he came back?"

"Five or six days ago. It was night and I'd already turned off my light. I wasn't asleep, though. I heard someone knock, and then they talked in low voices like the first time. Mademoiselle Doncoeur sometimes comes over in the evening, but I could tell it wasn't she. I thought they were quarreling and I was frightened. I called out, and Mama Loraine came

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in and said it was the man about the insurance again and I should go to sleep."

"Did he stay long?"

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep."

"And you didn't see him either time?"

"No, but I'd recognize his voice."

"Even though he speaks in low tones?"

"Yes, that's why. When he speaks low it sound just like a big bumblebee. I can keep the doll, can't I? Mama Loraine bought me two boxes of candy and a little sewing kit. She bought me a doll, too, but it wasn't nearly as big as the doll Father Christmas gave me, because she's not rich. She showed it to me this morning before she left, and then she put it back in the box. I have the big one now, so I won't need the little one and Mama Loraine can take it back to the store."

The apartment was overheated, yet Maigret felt suddenly cold. The building was very much like the one across the street, yet not only did the rooms seem smaller and stuffier, but the whole world seemed smaller and meaner over here.

He bent over the floor near the fireplace. He lifted the loose floor boards, but saw nothing but an empty, dusty cavity smelling of dampness. There were scratches on the planks which indicated they had been forced up with a chisel or some similar instrument.

He examined the outside door and found indications that it had been forced. It was obviously an amateur's work, and luckily for him, the job had been an easy one.

"Father Christmas wasn't angry when he saw you watching him?"

"No, Monsieur. He was busy making a hole in the floor so he could go and see the little boy downstairs."

"Did he speak to you?"

"I think he smiled at me. I'm not sure, though, because of his whiskers. It wasn't very light. But I'm sure he put his finger to his lips so I wouldn't call anybody, because grown-ups aren't supposed to see Father Christmas. Did you ever see him?"

"A very long time ago."

"When you were little?"

Maigret heard footsteps in the hallway. The door opened and Madame Martin came in. She was wearing a gray tailored suit and a small beige hat and carried a brown shopping bag. She was visibly cold, for her skin was taut and very white, yet she must have hurried up the stairs, since there were two pink spots on her cheeks and she was out of breath. Unsmiling, she asked Maigret:

"Has she been a good girl?" Then, as she took off her jacket, "I apologize for making you wait. I had so many things to buy, and I was afraid the stores would all be closed later on."

"Did you meet anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I was wondering if anyone tried to speak to you."

She had had plenty of time to go much further than the Rue Amelot or the Rue du Chemin-Vert where most

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of the neighborhood shops were located. She had even had time to go across Paris and back by taxi or the Metro.

Mlle. Doncoeur returned to ask if there was anything she could do. Madame Martin was about to say no when Maigret intervened: "I'd like you to stay with Colette while I step into the next room."

Mlle. Doncoeur understood that he wanted her to keep the child busy while he questioned the foster-mother. Madame Martin must have understood, too, but she gave no indication.

"Please come in. Do you mind if I take off my things?"

Madame Martin put her packages in the kitchen. She took off her hat and fluffed out her pale blonde hair. When she had closed the bedroom door, she said: "Mlle. Doncoeur is all excited. This is quite an event, isn't it, for an old maid — particularly an old maid who cuts out every newspaper article about a certain police inspector, and who finally has the inspector in her own house. . . . Do you mind?"

She had taken a cigarette from a silver case, tapped the end, and snapped a lighter. The gesture somehow prompted Maigret's next question:

"You're not working, Madame Martin?"

"It would be difficult to hold a job and take care of the house and the little girl, too, even when the child is in school. Besides, my husband won't allow me to work."

"But you did work before you met him?"

"Naturally. I had to earn a living. Won't you sit down?"

He lowered himself into a rude raffia-bottomed chair. She rested one thigh against the edge of a table.

"You were a typist?"

"I have been a typist."

"For long?"

"Quite a while."

"You were still a typist when you met Martin? You must forgive me for asking these personal questions."

"It's your job."

"You were married five years ago. Were you working then? Just a moment. May I ask your age?"

"I'm thirty-three. I was twenty-eight then, and I was working for a Monsieur Lorilleux in the Palais-Royal arcades."

"As his secretary?"

"Monsieur Lorilleux had a jewelry shop. Or more exactly, he sold souvenirs and old coins. You know those old shops in the Palais-Royal. I was salesgirl, bookkeeper, *and* secretary. I took care of the shop when he was away."

"He was married?"

"And father of three children."

"You left him to marry Martin?"

"Not exactly. Jean didn't want me to go on working, but he wasn't making very much money then and I had quite a good job. So I kept it for the first few months."

"And then?"

"Then a strange thing happened. One morning I came to work at 9

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o'clock as usual, and I found the door locked. I thought Monsieur Lorilleux had overslept, so I waited. . . ."

"Where did he live?"

"Rue Mazarine with his family. At half-past 9 I began to worry."

"Was he dead?"

"No. I phoned his wife, who said he had left the house at 8 o'clock as usual."

"Where did you telephone from?"

"From the glove shop next door. I waited all morning. His wife came down and we went to the commissariat together to report him missing, but the police didn't take it very seriously. They just asked his wife if he'd ever had heart trouble, if he had a mistress — things like that. But he was never seen again, and nobody ever heard from him. Then some Polish people bought out the store and my husband made me stop working."

"How long was this after your marriage?"

"Four months."

"Your husband was already traveling in the southwest?"

"He had the same territory he has now."

"Was he in Paris when your employer disappeared?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Didn't the police examine the premises?"

"Nothing had been touched since the night before. Nothing was missing."

"Do you know what became of Madame Lorilleux?"

"She lived for a while on the money from the sale of the store. Then she bought a little dry-goods shop not far from here, in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule. Her children must be grown up now, probably married."

"Do you still see her?"

"I go into her shop once in a while. That's how I know she's in business in the neighborhood. The first time I saw her there I didn't recognize her."

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. Six months or so."

"Does she have a telephone?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"What kind of man was Lorilleux?"

"You mean physically?"

"Let's start with the physical."

"He was a big man, taller than you, and broader. He was fat, but flabby, if you know what I mean. And rather sloppy-looking."

"How old?"

"Around fifty. I can't say exactly. He had a little salt-and-pepper mustache, and his clothes were always too big for him."

"You were familiar with his habits?"

"He walked to work every morning. He got down fifteen minutes ahead of me and cleared up the mail before I arrived. He didn't talk much. He was a rather gloomy person. He spent most of the day in the little office behind the shop."

"No romantic adventures?"

"Not that I know of."

"Didn't he try to make love to you?"

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"No!" The monosyllable was tartly emphatic.

"But he thought highly of you?"

"I think I was a great help to him."

"Did your husband ever meet him?"

"They never spoke. Jean sometimes came to wait for me outside the shop, but he never came in." A note of impatience, tinged with anger, crept into her voice. "Is that all you want to know?"

"May I point out, Madame Martin, that you are the one who came to get me?"

"Only because a crazy old maid practically dragged me there so she could get a close-up look at you."

"You don't like Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"I don't like people who can't mind their own business."

"People like Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"You know that we've taken in my brother-in-law's child. Believe me or not, I've done everything I can for her. I treat her the way I'd treat my own child. . . ." She paused to light a fresh cigarette, and Maigret tried unsuccessfully to picture her as a doting mother. ". . . And now that old maid is always over here, offering to help me with the child. Every time I start to go out, I find her in the hallway, smiling sweetly, and saying, 'You mustn't leave Colette all alone, Madame Martin. Let me go in and keep her company.' I sometimes wonder if she doesn't go through my drawers when I'm out."

"You put up with her, nevertheless."

"How can I help it? Colette asks for her, especially since she's been in bed. And my husband is fond of her because when he was a bachelor, she took care of him when he was sick with pleurisy."

"Have you already returned the doll you bought for Colette's Christmas?"

She frowned and glanced at the door to the child's bedroom. "I see you've been questioning the little girl. No, I haven't taken it back for the very good reason that all the big department stores are closed today. Would you like to see it?"

She spoke defiantly, expecting him to refuse, but he said nothing. He examined the cardboard box, noting the price tag. It was a very cheap doll.

"May I ask where you went this morning?"

"I did my marketing."

"Rue Amelot or Rue du Chemin-Vert?"

"Both."

"If I may be indiscreet, what did you buy?"

Furious, she stormed into the kitchen, snatched up her shopping bag, and dumped it on the dining room table. "Look for yourself!"

There were three tins of sardines, butter, potatoes, some ham, and a head of lettuce.

She fixed him with a hard, unwavering stare. She was not in the least nervous. Spiteful, rather.

"Any more questions?"

"Yes. The name of your insurance agent."

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"My insurance. . . ." She was obviously puzzled.

"Insurance agent. The one who came to see you."

"I'm sorry. I was at a loss for a moment because you spoke of *my* agent as though he were really handling a policy for me. So Colette told you that, too? Actually, a man did come to see me twice, trying to sell me a policy. He was one of those door-to-door salesmen, and I thought at first he was selling vacuum cleaners, not life insurance. I had a terrible time getting rid of him."

"Did he stay long?"

"Long enough for me to convince him that I had no desire to take out a policy."

"What company did he represent?"

"He told me but I've forgotten. Something with 'Mutual' in it."

"And he came back later?"

"Yes."

"What time does Colette usually go to sleep?"

"I put out her light at 7:30, but sometimes she talks to herself in the dark until much later."

"So the second time the insurance man called, it was later than 7:30?"

"Possibly." She saw the trap. "I remember now I was washing the dishes."

"And you let him in?"

"He had his foot in the door."

"Did he call on other tenants in the building?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but I'm sure you will inquire. Must you cross-examine me like a criminal, just because a little girl imagines she saw Santa Claus? If my husband were here —"

"By the way, does your husband carry life insurance?"

"I think so. In fact, I'm sure he does."

Maigret picked up his hat from a chair and started for the door. Madame Martin seemed surprised.

"Is that all?"

"That's all. It seems your brother-in-law promised to come and see his daughter today. If he should come, I would be grateful if you let me know. And now I'd like a few words with Mlle. Doncoeur."

There was a convent smell about Mlle. Doncoeur's apartment, but there was no dog or cat in sight, no antimacassars on the chairs, no bric-abrac on the mantelpiece.

"Have you lived in this house long, Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"Twenty-five years, Monsieur l'Inspecteur. I'm one of the oldest tenants. I remember when I first moved in you were already living across the street, and you wore long mustaches."

"Who lived in the next apartment before Martin moved in?"

"A public works engineer. I don't remember his name, but I could look it up for you. He had a wife and daughter. The girl was a deaf-mute. It was very sad. They went to live somewhere in the country."

"Have you been bothered by a door-to-door insurance agent recently?"

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"Not recently. There was one who came around two or three years ago."

"You don't like Madame Martin, do you?"

"Why?"

"I asked if you liked Madame Martin?"

"Well, if I had a son . . ."

"Go on."

"If I had a son I don't think I would like Madame Martin for a daughter-in-law. Especially as Monsieur Martin is such a nice man, so kind."

"You think he is unhappy with his wife?"

"I wouldn't say that. I have nothing against her, really. She can't help being the kind of woman she is."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"I couldn't say, exactly. You've seen her. You're a better judge of those things than I am. In a way, she's not like a woman at all. I'll wager she never shed a tear in her life. True, she is bringing up the child properly, decently, but she never says a kind word to her. She acts exasperated when I tell Colette a fairy tale. I'm sure she's told the girl there is no Santa Claus. Luckily Colette doesn't believe her."

"The child doesn't like her either, does she?"

"Colette is always obedient. She tries to do what's expected of her. I think she's just as happy to be left alone."

"Is she alone much?"

"Not much. I'm not reproaching Madame Martin. It's hard to explain. She wants to live her own life. She's not interested in others. She doesn't even talk much about herself."

"Have you ever met her brother-in-law — Colette's father?"

"I've seen him on the landing, but I've never spoken to him. He walks with his head down, as if he were ashamed of something. He always looks as if he slept in his clothes. No, I don't think it was he last night, Monsieur Maigret. He's not the type. Unless he was terribly drunk."

On his way out Maigret looked in at the concierge's lodge, a dark cubicle where the light burned all day.

It was noon when he started back across the boulevard. Curtains stirred at the windows of the house behind him. Curtains stirred at his own window, too. Mme. Maigret was watching for him so she would know when to put the chicken in the oven. He waved to her. He wanted very much to stick out his tongue and lick up a few of the tiny snow flakes that were drifting down. He could still remember their taste.

"I wonder if that little tike is happy over there," sighed Mme. Maigret as she got up from the table to bring the coffee from the kitchen.

She could see he wasn't listening. He had pushed back his chair and was stuffing his pipe while staring at the purring stove. For her own satisfaction she added: "I don't see how she could be happy with that woman."

He smiled vaguely, as he always did

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when he hadn't heard what she said, and continued to stare at the tiny flames licking evenly at the mica windows of the salamander. There were at least ten similar stoves in the house, all purring alike in ten similar dining rooms with wine and cakes on the table, a carafe of cordial waiting on the sideboard, and all the windows pale with the same hard, gray light of a sunless day.

It was perhaps this very familiarity which had been confusing his subconscious since morning. Nine times out of ten his investigations plunged him abruptly into new surroundings, set him at grips with people of a world he barely knew, people of a social level whose habits and manners he had to study from scratch. But in this case, which was not really a case since he had no official assignment, the whole approach was unfamiliar because the background was too familiar. For the first time in his career something professional was happening in his own world, in a building which might just as well be his building.

The Martins could easily have been living on his floor, instead of across the street, and it would probably have been Mme. Maigret who would look after Colette when her aunt was away. There was an elderly maiden lady living just under him who was a plumper, paler replica of Mlle. Doncoeur. The frames of the photographs of Martin's father and mother were exactly the same as those which framed Maigret's father and mother, and the enlargements had probably been made by the same studio.

Was that what was bothering him? He seemed to lack perspective. He was unable to look at people and things from a fresh, new viewpoint.

He had detailed his morning activities during dinner — a pleasant little Christmas dinner which had left him with an overstuffed feeling — and his wife had listened while looking at the windows across the street with an air of embarrassment.

"Is the concierge sure that nobody could have come in from outside?"

"She's not so sure any more. She was entertaining friends until after midnight. And after she had gone to bed, there were considerable comings and goings, which is natural for Christmas Eve."

"Do you think something more is going to happen?"

That was a question that had been plaguing Maigret all morning. First of all, he had to consider that Madame Martin had not come to see him spontaneously, but only on the insistence of Mlle. Doncoeur. If she had got up earlier, if she had been the first to see the doll and hear the story of Father Christmas, wouldn't she have kept the secret and ordered the little girl to say nothing?

And later she had taken the first opportunity to go out, even though there was plenty to eat in the house for the day. And she had been so absent-minded that she had bought butter, although there was still a pound in the cooler.

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Maigret got up from the table and resettled himself in his chair by the window. He picked up the phone and called Quai des Orfèvres.

"Lucas?"

"I got what you wanted, Chief. I have a list of all prisoners released for the last four months. There aren't as many as I thought. And none of them has lived in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir at any time."

That didn't matter any more now. At first Maigret had thought that a tenant across the street might have hidden money or stolen goods under the floor before he was arrested. His first thought on getting out of jail would be to recover his booty. With the little girl bedridden, however, the room was occupied day and night. Impersonating Father Christmas would not have been a bad idea to get into the room. Had this been the case, however, Madame Martin would not have been so reluctant to call in Maigret. Nor would she have been in so great a hurry to get out of the house afterwards on such a flimsy pretext. So Maigret had abandoned that theory.

"You want me to check each prisoner further?"

"Never mind. Any news about Paul Martin?"

'That was easy. He's known in every station house between the Bastille and the Hotel de Ville, and even on the Boulevard Saint-Michel."

"What did he do last night?"

"First he went aboard the Salvation Army barge to eat. He's a regular there one day a week and yesterday was his day. They had a special feast for Christmas Eve and he had to stand in line quite a while."

"After that?"

"About 11 o'clock he went to the Latin Quarter and opened doors for motorists in front of a night club. He must have collected enough money in tips to get himself a sinkful, because he was picked up dead drunk near the Place Maubert at 4 in the morning. He was taken to the station house to sleep it off, and was there until 11 this morning. They'd just turned him loose when I phoned, and they promised to bring him to me when they find him again. He still had a few francs in his pocket."

"What about Bergerac?"

"Jean Martin is taking the afternoon train for Paris. He was quite upset by a phone call he got this morning."

"He got only one call?"

"Only one this morning. He got a call last night while he was eating dinner."

"You know who called him?"

"The desk clerk says it was a man's voice, asking for Monsieur Jean Martin. He sent somebody into the dining room for Martin but when Martin got to the phone, the caller had hung up. Seems it spoiled his whole evening. He went out with a bunch of traveling salesmen to some local hot-spot where there were pretty girls and whatnot, but after drinking a few glasses of champagne, he couldn't talk about anything except

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his wife and daughter. The niece he calls his daughter, it seems. He had such a dismal evening that he went home early. 3 A.M. That's all you wanted to know, Chief?"

When Maigret didn't reply, Lucas had to satisfy his curiosity. "You still phoning from home, Chief? What's happening up your way? Somebody get killed?"

"I still can't say. Right now all I know is that the principals are a seven-year-old girl, a doll, and Father Christmas."

"Ah?"

"One more thing. Try to get me the home address of the manager of Zenith Watches, Avenue de l'Opéra. You ought to be able to raise somebody there, even on Christmas Day. Call me back."

"Soon as I have something."

Mme. Maigret had just served him a glass of Alsatian plum brandy which her sister had sent them. He smacked his lips. For a moment he was tempted to forget all about the business of the doll and Father Christmas. It would be much simpler just to take his wife to the movies. . . .

"What color eyes has she?"

It took him a moment to realize that the only person in the case who interested Mme. Maigret was the little girl.

"Why, I'm not quite sure. They can't be dark. She has blonde hair."

"So they're blue."

"Maybe they're blue. Very light, in any case. And they are very serious."

"Because she doesn't look at things like a child. Does she laugh?"

"She hasn't much to laugh about."

"A child can always laugh if she feels herself surrounded by people she can trust, people who let her act her age. I don't like that woman."

"You prefer Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"She may be an old maid but I'm sure she knows more about children than that Madame Martin. I've seen *her* in the shops. Madame Martin is one of those women who watch the scales, and take their money out of their pocketbooks, coin by coin. She always looks around suspiciously, as though everybody was out to cheat her."

The telephone rang as Mme. Maigret was repeating, "I don't like that woman."

It was Lucas calling, with the address of Monsieur Arthur Godefroy, general manager in France for Zenith Watches. He lived in a sumptuous villa at Saint-Cloud, and Lucas had discovered that he was at home. He added:

"Paul Martin is here, Chief. When they brought him in, he started crying. He thought something had happened to his daughter. But he's all right now — except for an awful hangover. What do I do with him?"

"Anyone around who can come up here with him?"

"Torrence just came on duty. I think he could use a little fresh air. He looks as if he had a hard night, too. Anything more from me, Chief?"

"Yes. Call Palais-Royal station.

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About five years ago a man named Lorilleux disappeared without a trace. He sold jewelry and old coins in the Palais-Royal arcades. Get me all the details you can on his disappearance."

Maigret smiled as he noted that his wife was sitting opposite him with her knitting. He had never before worked on a case in such domestic surroundings.

"Do I call you back?" asked Lucas.

"I don't expect to move an inch from my chair."

A moment later Maigret was talking to Monsieur Godefroy, who had a decided Swiss accent. The Zenith manager thought that something must have happened to Jean Martin, for anyone to be making inquiries about him on Christmas Day.

"Most able . . . most devoted . . . I'm bringing him into Paris to be assistant manager next year. . . . Next week, that is . . . Why do you ask? Has anything — ? Be still, you!" He paused to quiet the juvenile hubbub in the background. "You must excuse me. All my family is with me today and —"

"Tell me, Monsieur Godefroy, has anyone called your office these last few days to inquire about Monsieur Martin's current address?"

"Yesterday morning, as a matter of fact. I was very busy with the holiday rush, but he asked to speak to me personally. I forget what name he gave. He said he had an extremely important message for Jean Martin, so I told him how to get in touch with Martin in Bergerac."

"He asked you nothing else?"

"No. He hung up at once. Is anything wrong?"

"I hope not. Thank you very much, Monsieur."

The screams of children began again in the background and Maigret said goodbye.

"Were you listening?"

"I heard what you said. I didn't hear his answers."

"A man called the office yesterday morning to get Martin's address. The same man undoubtedly called Bergerac that evening to make sure Martin was still there, and therefore would not be at his Boulevard Richard-Lenoir address for Christmas Eve."

"The same man who appeared last night as Father Christmas?"

"More than likely. That seems to clear Paul Martin. He would not have to make two phone calls to find out where his brother was. Madame Martin would have told him."

"You're really getting excited about this case. You're delighted that it came up, aren't you? Confess!" And while Maigret was racking his brain for excuses, she added: "It's quite natural. I'm fascinated, too. How much longer do you think the child will have to keep her leg in a cast?"

"I didn't ask."

"I wonder what sort of complications she could have had?"

Maigret looked at her curiously. Unconsciously she had switched his mind onto a new track.

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"That's not such a stupid remark you just made."

"What did I say?"

"After all, since she's been in bed for two months, she should be up and around soon, barring really serious complications."

"She'll probably have to walk on crutches at first."

"That's not the point. In a few days then, or a few weeks at most, she will no longer be confined to her room. She'll go for a walk with Madame Martin. And the coast will be clear for anyone to enter the apartment without dressing up like Father Christmas."

Mme. Maigret's lips were moving. While listening to her husband and watching his face, she was counting stitches.

"First of all, the presence of the child forced our man to use trickery. She's been in bed for two months — two months for him to wait. Without the complications the flooring could have been taken up several weeks ago. Our man must have had urgent reasons for acting at once, without further delay."

"Monsieur Martin will return to Paris in a few days?"

"Exactly."

"What do you suppose the man found underneath the floor?"

"Did he really find anything? If not, his problem is still as pressing as it was last night. So he will take further action."

"What action?"

"I don't know."

"Look, Maigret, isn't the child in danger? Do you think she's safe with that woman?"

"I could answer that if I knew where Madame Martin went this morning on the pretext of doing her shopping." He picked up the phone again and called Police Judiciaire.

"I'm pestering you again, Lucas. I want you to locate a taxi that picked up a passenger this morning between 9 and 10 somewhere near Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. The fare was a woman in her early thirties, blonde, slim but solidly built. She was wearing a gray suit and a beige hat. She carried a brown shopping bag. I want to know her destination. There couldn't have been so many cabs on the street at that hour."

"Is Paul Martin with you?"

"Not yet."

"He'll be there soon. About that other thing, the Lorilleux matter, the Palais-Royal boys are checking their files. You'll have the data in a few minutes."

Jean Martin must be taking his train in Bergerac at this moment. Little Colette was probably taking her nap. Mlle. Doncoeur was doubtless sitting behind her window curtain, wondering what Maigret was up to.

People were beginning to come out now, families with their children, the children with their new toys. There were certainly queues in front of the cinemas. . . .

A taxi stopped in front of the house. Footsteps sounded in the stairway. Mme. Maigret went to the door. The

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deep bass voice of Torrence rumbled: "You there, Chief?"

Torrence came in with an ageless man who hugged the walls and looked humbly at the floor. Maigret went to the sideboard and filled two glasses with plum brandy.

"To your health," he said.

The man looked at Maigret with surprised, anxious eyes. He raised a trembling, hesitant hand.

"To your health, Monsieur Martin. I'm sorry to make you come all the way up here, but you won't have far to go now to see your daughter."

"Nothing has happened to her?"

"No, no. When I saw her this morning she was playing with her new doll. You can go, Torrence. Lucas must need you."

Mme. Maigret had gone into the bedroom with her knitting. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, counting her stitches.

"Sit down, Monsieur Martin."

The man had touched his lips to the glass and set it down. He looked at it uneasily.

"You have nothing to worry about. Just tell yourself that I know all about you."

"I wanted to visit her this morning," the man sighed. "I swore I would go to bed early so I could wish her a Merry Christmas."

"I know that, too."

"It's always the same. I swear I'll take just one drink, just enough to pick me up. . . ."

"You have only one brother, Monsieur Martin?"

"Yes, Jean. He's six years younger than I am. He and my wife and my daughter were all I had to love in this world."

"You don't love your sister-in-law?"

He shivered. He seemed both startled and embarrassed.

"I have nothing against Loraine."

"You entrusted your child to her, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, that is to say, when my wife died and I began to slip. . . ."

"I understand. Is your daughter happy?"

"I think so, yes. She never complains."

"Have you ever tried to get back on your feet?"

"Every night I promise myself to turn over a new leaf, but next day I start all over again. I even went to see a doctor. I followed his advice for a few days. But when I went back, he was very busy. He said I ought to be in a special sanatorium."

He reached for his glass, then hesitated. Maigret picked up his own glass and took a swallow to encourage him.

"Did you ever meet a man in your sister-in-law's apartment?"

"No. I think she's above reproach on that score."

"Do you know where your brother first met her?"

"In a little restaurant in the Rue Beaujolais where he used to eat when he was in Paris. It was near the shop where Loraine was working."

"Did they have a long engagement?"

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"I can't say. Jean was on the road for two months and when he came back he told me he was getting married."

"Were you his best man?"

"Yes. Loraine has no family in Paris. She's an orphan. So her landlady acted as her witness. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't know yet. A man entered Colette's room last night dressed as Father Christmas. He gave your girl a doll, and lifted two loose boards from the floor."

"Do you think I'm in fit condition to see her?"

"You can go over in a little while. If you feel like it you can shave here. Do you think your brother would be likely to hide anything under the floor?"

"Jean? Never!"

"Even if he wanted to hide something from his wife?"

"He doesn't hide things from his wife. You don't know him. He's one of those rare humans — a scrupulously honest man. When he comes home from the road, she knows exactly how much money he has left, to the last centime."

"Is she jealous?"

Paul Martin did not reply.

"I advise you to tell me what you know. Remember that your daughter is involved in this."

"I don't think that Loraine is especially jealous. Not of women, at least. Perhaps about money. At least that's what my poor wife always said. She didn't like Loraine."

"Why not?"

"She used to say that Loraine's lips were too thin, that she was too polite, too cold, always on the defensive. My wife always thought that Loraine set her cap for Jean because he had a good job with a future and owned his own furniture."

"Loraine had no money of her own?"

"She never speaks of her family. I understand her father died when she was very young and her mother did housework somewhere in the Glacière quarter. My poor wife used to say, 'Loraine knows what she wants.' "

"Do you think she was Lorilleux's mistress?"

Paul Martin did not reply. Maigret poured him another finger of plum brandy. Martin gave him a grateful look, but he did not touch the glass. Perhaps he was thinking that his daughter might notice his breath when he crossed the street later on.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee in a moment. . . . Your wife must have had her own ideas on the subject."

"How did you know? Please note that my wife never spoke disparagingly of people. But with Loraine it was almost pathological. Whenever we were to meet my sister-in-law, I used to beg my wife not to show her antipathy. It's funny that you should bring all that up now, at this time in my life. Do you think I did wrong in letting her take Colette? I sometimes think so. But what else could I have done?"

"You didn't answer my question

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about Loraine's former employer."

"Oh, yes. My wife always said it was very convenient for Loraine to have married a man who was away from home so much."

"You know where she lived before her marriage?"

"In a street just off Boulevard Sébastopol, on the right as you walk from Rue de Rivoli toward the Boulevard. I remember we picked her up there the day of the wedding."

"Rue Pernelle?"

"That's it. The fourth or fifth house on the left side of the street is a quiet rooming house, quite respectable. People who work in the neighborhood live there. I remember there were several little actresses from the Châtelet."

"Would you like to shave, Monsieur Martin?"

"I'm ashamed. Still, since my daughter is just across the street. . . ."

"Come with me."

Maigret took him through the kitchen so he wouldn't have to meet Mme. Maigret in the bedroom. He set out the necessary toilet articles, not forgetting a clothes brush.

When he returned to the dining room, Mme. Maigret poked her head through the door and whispered: "What's he doing?"

"He's shaving."

Once more Maigret reached for the telephone. He was certainly giving poor Lucas a busy Christmas Day.

"Are you indispensable at the office?"

"Not if Torrence sits in for me. I've got the information you wanted."

"In just a moment. I want you to jump over to Rue Pernelle. There's a rooming house a few doors down from the Boulevard Sébastopol. If the proprietor wasn't there five years ago, try to dig up someone who lived there then. I want everything you can find out on a certain Loraine. . . ."

"Loraine who?"

"Just a minute, I didn't think of that."

Through the bathroom door he asked Martin for the maiden name of his sister-in-law. A few seconds later he was on the phone again.

"Loraine Boitel," he told Lucas. "The landlady of this rooming house was witness at her marriage to Jean Martin. Loraine Boitel was working for Lorilleux at the time. Try to find out if she was more than a secretary to him, and if he ever came to see her. And work fast. This may be urgent. What have you got on Lorilleux?"

"He was quite a fellow. At home in the Rue Mazarine he was a good respectable family man. In his Palais-Royal shop he not only sold old coins and souvenirs of Paris, but he had a fine collection of pornographic books and obscene pictures."

"Not unusual for the Palais-Royal."

"I don't know what else went on there. There was a big divan covered with red silk rep in the back room, but the investigation was never pushed. Seems there were a lot of important names among his customers."

"What about Loraine Boitel?"

"The report barely mentions her,

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except that she waited all morning for Lorilleux the day he disappeared. I was on the phone about this when Langlois of the Financial Squad came into my office. The name Lorilleux rang a bell in the back of his mind and he went to check his files. Nothing definite on him, but he'd been making frequent trips to Switzerland and back, and there was a lot of gold smuggling going on at that time. Lorilleux was stopped and searched at the frontier several times, but they never found anything on him."

"Lucas, old man, hurry over to Rue Pernelle. I'm more than ever convinced that this is urgent."

Paul Martin appeared in the doorway, his pale cheeks close-shaven.

"I don't know how to thank you. I'm very much embarrassed."

"You'll visit your daughter now, won't you? I don't know how long you usually stay, but today I don't want you to leave until I come for you."

"I can't very well stay all night, can I?"

"Stay all night if necessary. Manage the best you can."

"Is the little girl in danger?"

"I don't know, but your place today is with your daughter."

Paul Martin drank his black coffee avidly, and started for the stairway. The door had just closed after him when Mme. Maigret rushed into the dining room.

"You can't let him go to see his daughter empty-handed on Christmas Day!"

"But —" Maigret was about to say that there just didn't happen to be a doll around the house, when his wife thrust a small shiny object into his hands. It was a gold thimble which had been in her sewing basket for years but which she never used.

"Give him that. Little girls always like thimbles. Hurry!"

He shouted from the landing: "Monsieur Martin! Just a minute, Monsieur Martin!"

He closed the man's fingers over the thimble. "Don't tell a soul where you got this."

Before re-entering the dining room he stood for a moment on the threshold, grumbling. Then he sighed: "I hope you've finished making me play Father Christmas."

"I'll bet she likes the thimble as well as a doll. It's something grown-ups use, you know."

They watched the man cross the boulevard. Before going into the house he turned to look up at Maigret's windows, as if seeking encouragement.

"Do you think he'll ever be cured?"

"I doubt it."

"If anything happens to that woman, to Madame Martin. . . ."

"Well?"

"Nothing. I was thinking of the little girl. I wonder what would become of her."

Ten minutes passed. Maigret had opened his newspaper and lighted his pipe. His wife had settled down again with her knitting. She was counting stitches when he exhaled

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a cloud of smoke and murmured: "You haven't even seen her."

Maigret was looking for an old envelope, on the back of which he had jotted down a few notes summing up the day's events. He found it in a drawer into which Mme. Maigret always stuffed any papers she found lying around the house.

This was the only investigation, he mused, which he had ever conducted practically in its entirety from his favorite armchair. It was also unusual in that no dramatic stroke of luck had come to his aid. True, luck had been on his side, in that he had been able to muster all his facts by the simplest and most direct means. How many times had he deployed scores of detectives on an all-night search for some minor detail. This might have happened, for instance, if Monsieur Arthur Godefroy of Zenith had gone home to Zurich for Christmas, or if he had been out of reach of a telephone. Or if Monsieur Godefroy had been unaware of the telephone inquiry regarding the whereabouts of Jean Martin.

When Lucas arrived shortly after 4 o'clock, his nose red and his face pinched with the cold, he too could report the same kind of undramatic luck.

A thick yellow fog, unusual for Paris, had settled over the city. Lights shone in all the windows, floating in the murk like ships at sea or distant beacons. Familiar details had been blotted out so completely that Maigret half-expected to hear the moan of fog horns.

For some reason, perhaps because of some boyhood memory, Maigret was pleased to see the weather thicken. He was also pleased to see Lucas walk into his apartment, take off his overcoat, sit down, and stretch out his frozen hands toward the fire.

In appearance, Lucas was a reduced-scale model of Maigret — a head shorter, half as broad in the shoulders, half as stern in expression although he tried hard. Without conscious imitation but with conscious admiration, Lucas had copied his chief's slightest gestures, postures, and changes of expression — even to the ceremony of inhaling the fragrance of the plum brandy before touching his lips to the glass.

The landlady of the rooming house in the Rue Pernelle had been killed in a subway accident two years earlier, Lucas reported. Luckily, the place had been taken over by the former night watchman, who had been in trouble with the police on morals charges.

"So it was easy enough to make him talk," said Lucas, lighting a pipe much too large for him. "I was surprised that he had the money to buy the house, but he explained that he was front man for a big investor who had money in all sorts of enterprises but didn't like to have his name used."

"What kind of dump is it?"

"Looks respectable. Clean enough. Office on the mezzanine. Rooms by

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the month, some by the week, and a few on the second floor by the hour."

"He remembers Loraine?"

"Very well. She lived there more than three years. I got the impression he didn't like her because she was tight-fisted."

"Did Lorilleux come to see her?"

"On my way to the Rue Pernelle I picked up a photo of Lorilleux at the Palais-Royal station. The new landlord recognized him right away."

"Lorilleux went to her room often?"

"Two or three times a month. He always had baggage with him, he always arrived around 1 o'clock in the morning, and always left before 6. I checked the timetables. There's a train from Switzerland around midnight and another at 6 in the morning. He must have told his wife he was taking the 6 o'clock train."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing, except that Loraine was stingy with tips, and always cooked her dinner on an alcohol burner, even though the house rules said no cooking in the rooms."

"No other men?"

"No. Very respectable except for Lorilleux. The landlady was witness at her wedding."

Maigret glanced at his wife. He had insisted she remain in the room when Lucas came. She stuck to her knitting, trying to make believe she was not there.

Torrence was out in the fog, going from garage to garage, checking the trip-sheets of taxi fleets. The two men waited serenely, deep in their easy chairs, each holding a glass of plum brandy with the same pose. Maigret felt a pleasant numbness creeping over him.

His Christmas luck held out with the taxis, too. Sometimes it took days to run down a particular taxi driver, particularly when the cab in question did not belong to a fleet. Cruising drivers were the hardest to locate; they sometimes never even read the newspapers. But shortly before 5 o'clock Torrence called from Saint-Ouen.

"I found one of the taxis," he reported.

"One? Was there more than one?"

"Looks that way. This man picked up the woman at the corner of Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and Boulevard Voltaire this morning. He drove her to Rue de Maubeuge, opposite the Gare du Nord, where she paid him off."

"Did she go into the railway station?"

"No. The chauffeur says she went into a luggage shop that keeps open on Sundays and holidays. After that he doesn't know."

"Where's the driver now?"

"Right here in the garage. He just checked in."

"Send him to me, will you? Right away. I don't care how he gets here as long as it's in a hurry. Now I want you to find me the cab that brought her home."

"Sure, Chief, as soon as I get myself a coffee with a stick in it. It's damned cold out here."

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Maigret glanced through the window. There was a shadow against Mlle. Doncoeur's curtains. He turned to Lucas.

"Look in the phone book for a luggage shop across from the Gare du Nord."

Lucas took only a minute to come up with a number, which Maigret dialed.

"Hello, this is the Police Judiciaire. Shortly before 10 this morning a young woman bought something in your shop, probably a valise. She was a blonde, wearing a gray suit and beige hat. She carried a brown shopping bag. Do you remember her?"

Perhaps trade was slack on Christmas Day. Or perhaps it was easier to remember customers who shopped on Christmas. In any case, the voice on the phone replied:

"Certainly, I waited on her myself. She said she had to leave suddenly for Cambrai because her sister was ill, and she didn't have time to go home for her bags. She wanted a cheap valise, and I sold her a fiber model we have on sale. She paid me and went into the bar next door. I was standing in the doorway and a little later I saw her walking toward the station, carrying the valise."

"Are you alone in your shop?"

"I have one clerk on duty."

"Can you leave him alone for half an hour? Fine! Then jump in a taxi and come to this address. I'll pay the fare, of course."

"And the return fare? Shall I have the cab wait?"

"Have him wait, yes."

According to Maigret's notes on the back of the envelope, the first taxi driver arrived at 5:50 P.M. He was somewhat surprised, since he had been summoned by the police, to find himself in a private apartment. He recognized Maigret, however, and made no effort to disguise his curious interest in how the famous inspector lived.

"I want you to climb to the fourth floor of the house just across the street. If the concierge stops you, tell her you're going to see Madame Martin."

"Madame Martin. I got it."

"Go to the door at the end of the hall and ring the bell. If a blonde opens the door and you recognize her, make some excuse — You're on the wrong floor, anything you think of. If somebody else answers, ask to speak to Madame Martin personally.

"And then?"

"Then you come back here and tell me whether or not she is the fare you drove to Rue de Maubeuge this morning."

"I'll be right back, Inspector."

As the door closed, Maigret smiled in spite of himself.

"The first call will make her worry a little. The second, if all goes well, will make her panicky. The third, if Torrence has any luck —"

Torrence, too, was having his run of Christmas luck. The phone rang and he reported:

"I think I've found him, Chief. I dug up a driver who picked up a woman answering your description at

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the Gare du Nord, only he didn't take her to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. He dropped her at the corner of Boulevard Beaumarchais and the Rue du Chemin-Vert."

"Send him to me."

"He's a little squiffed."

"No matter. Where are you?"

"The Barbès garage."

"Then it won't be much out of your way to stop by the Gare du Nord. Go to the check room. Unfortunately it won't be the same man on duty, but try to find out if a small new valise was checked between 9:30 and 10 this morning. It's made of fiber and shouldn't be too heavy. Get the number of the check. They won't let you take the valise without a warrant, so try to get the name and address of the man on duty this morning."

"What next?"

"Phone me. I'll wait for your second taxi driver. If he's been drinking, better write down my address for him, so he won't get lost."

Mme. Maigret was back in the kitchen, preparing the evening meal. She hadn't dared ask whether Lucas would eat with them.

Maigret wondered if Paul Martin was still across the street with his daughter. Had Madame Martin tried to get rid of him?

The bell rang again. Two men stood at the door.

The first driver had come back from Madame Martin's and had climbed Maigret's stairs behind the luggage dealer.

"Did you recognize her?"

"Sure. She recognized me, too. She turned pale. She ran to close a door behind her, then she asked me what I wanted."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I had the wrong floor. I think maybe she wanted to buy me off, but I didn't give her a chance. But she was watching from the window when I crossed the street. She probably knows I came here."

The luggage dealer was baffled and showed it. He was a middle-aged man, completely bald and equally obsequious. When the driver had gone, Maigret explained what he wanted, and the man objected vociferously.

"One just doesn't do this sort of thing to one's customers," he repeated stubbornly. "One simply does not inform on one's customers, you know."

After a long argument he agreed to call on Madame Martin. To make sure he didn't change his mind, Maigret sent Lucas to follow him.

They returned in less than ten minutes.

"I call your attention to the fact that I have acted under your orders, that I have been compelled —"

"Did you recognize her?"

"Will I be forced to testify under oath?"

"More than likely."

"That would be very bad for my business. People who buy luggage at the last minute are very often people who dislike public mention of their comings and goings."

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"You may not have to go to court. Your deposition before the examing magistrate may be sufficient."

"Very well. It was she. She's dressed differently, but I recognized her all right."

"Did she recognize you?"

"She asked immediately who had sent me."

"What did you say?"

"I . . . I don't remember. I was quite upset. I think I said I had rung the wrong bell."

"Did she offer you anything?"

"What do you mean? She didn't even offer me a chair. Luckily. It would have been most unpleasant."

Maigret smiled, somewhat incredulously. He believed that the taxi driver had actually run away from a possible bribe. He wasn't so sure about this prosperous-looking shopkeeper who obviously begrudged his loss of time.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

The luggage dealer departed hastily.

"And now for Number Three, my dear Lucas."

Mme. Maigret was beginning to grow nervous. From the kitchen door she made discreet signs to her husband, beckoning him to join her. She whispered: "Are you sure the father is still across the street?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I can't make out exactly what you're up to, but I've been thinking about the child, and I'm a little afraid. . . ."

Night had long since fallen. The families were all home again. Few windows across the street remained dark. The silhouette of Mlle. Doncoeur was still very much in evidence.

While waiting for the second taxi driver, Maigret decided to put on his collar and tie. He shouted to Lucas:

"Pour yourself another drop. Aren't you hungry?"

"I'm full of sandwiches, Chief. Only one thing I'd like when we go out: a tall beer, right from the spigot."

The second driver arrived at 6:20. At 6:35 he had returned from across the street, a gleam in his eye.

"She looks even better in her négligée than she does in her street clothes," he said thickly. "She made me come in and she asked who sent me. I didn't know what to say, so I told her I was a talent scout for the Folies Bergère. Was she furious! She's a fine hunk of woman, though, and I mean it. Did you get a look at her legs?"

He was in no hurry to leave. Maigret saw him ogling the bottle of plum brandy with envious eyes, and poured him a glass — to speed him on his way.

"What are you going to do next, Chief?" Lucas had rarely seen Maigret proceed with such caution, preparing each step with such care that he seemed to be mounting an attack on some desperate criminal. And yet the enemy was only a woman, a seemingly insignificant little housewife.

"You think she'll still fight back?"

"Fiercely. And what's more, in cold blood."

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"What are you waiting for?"

"The phone call from Torrence."

As if on cue, the telephone rang. Torrence, of course.

"The valise is here all right. It feels practically empty. As you predicted, they won't give it to me without a warrant. The check-room attendant who was on duty this morning lives in the suburbs, near La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire." A snag at last? Or at least a delay? Maigret frowned. But Torrence continued. "We won't have to go out there, though. When he finishes his day's work here, he plays cornet in a *bal musette* in the Rue de Lappe."

"Go get him for me."

"Shall I bring him to your place?"

Maigret hesitated, thinking of Lucas's yearning for a glass of draft beer.

"No, I'll be across the street. Madame Martin's apartment, fourth floor."

He took down his heavy overcoat. He filled his pipe.

"Coming?" he said to Lucas.

Mme. Maigret ran after him to ask what time he'd be home for dinner. After a moment of hesitation, he smiled.

"The usual time," was his not very reassuring answer.

"Look out for the little girl, will you?"

At 10 o'clock that evening the investigation was still blocked. It was unlikely that anyone in the whole building had gone to sleep, except Colette. She had finally dozed off, with her father sitting in the dark by her bedside.

Torrence had arrived at 7:30 with his part-time musician and check-room attendant, who declared:

"She's the one. I remember she didn't put the check in her handbag. She slipped it into a big brown shopping bag." And when they took him into the kitchen he added, "That's the bag. Or one exactly like it."

The Martin apartment was very warm. Everyone spoke in low tones, as if they had agreed not to awaken the child. Nobody had eaten. Nobody, apparently, was even hungry. On their way over, Maigret and Lucas had each drunk two beers in a little cafe on the Boulevard Voltaire.

After the cornetist had spoken his piece, Maigret took Torrence aside and murmured fresh instructions.

Every corner of the apartment had been searched. Even the photos of Martin's parents had been taken from their frames, to make sure the baggage check had not been secreted between picture and backing. The dishes had been taken from their shelves and piled on the kitchen table. The larder had been emptied and examined closely. No baggage check.

Madame Martin was still wearing her pale blue négligée. She was chain-smoking cigarettes. What with the smoke from the two men's pipes, a thick blue haze swirled about the lamps.

"You are of course free to say

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nothing and answer no questions. Your husband will arrive at 11:17. Perhaps you will be more talkative in his presence."

"He doesn't know any more than I do."

"Does he know as much?"

"There's nothing to know. I've told you everything."

She had sat back and denied everything, all along the line. She had conceded only one point. She admitted that Lorilleux had dropped in to see her two or three times at night when she lived in the Rue Pernelle. But she insisted there had been nothing between them, nothing personal.

"In other words he came to talk business — at 1 o'clock in the morning?"

"He used to come to town by a late train, and he didn't like to walk the streets with large sums of money on him. I already told you he might have been smuggling gold, but I had nothing to do with it. You can't arrest me for his activities."

"Did he have large sums of money on him when he disappeared?"

"I don't know. He didn't always take me into his confidence."

"But he did come to see you in your room at night?"

Despite the evidence, she clung to her story of the morning's marketing. She denied ever having seen the two taxi drivers, the luggage dealer, or the check-room attendant.

"If I had really left a package at the Gare du Nord, you would have found the check, wouldn't you?"

She glanced nervously at the clock on the mantel, obviously thinking of her husband's return.

"Admit that the man who came last night found nothing under the floor because you changed the hiding place."

"I know of nothing that was hidden under the floor."

"When you learned of his visit, you decided to move the treasure to the check room for safekeeping."

"I haven't been near the Gare du Nord. There must be thousands of blondes in Paris who answer my description."

"I think I know where we'll find the check."

"You're so very clever."

"Sit over here at this table." Maigret produced a fountain pen and a sheet of paper. "Write your name and address."

She hesitated, then obeyed.

"Tonight every letter mailed in this neighborhood will be examined, and I'll wager we will find one addressed in your handwriting, probably to yourself."

He handed the paper to Lucas with an order to get in touch with the postal authorities. Much to his surprise, the woman reacted visibly.

"You see, it's a very old trick, Little One." For the first time he called her "Little One," the way he would have done if he were questioning her in his office, Quai des Orfèvres.

They were alone now. Maigret slowly paced the floor, while she remained seated.

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"In case you're interested," Maigret said slowly, "the thing that shocks me most about you is not what you have done but the cold-blooded way you have done it. You've been dangling at the end of a slender thread since early this morning, and you still haven't blinked an eye. When your husband comes home, you'll try to play the martyr. And yet you know that sooner or later we'll discover the truth."

"But I've done nothing wrong."

"Then why do you lie?"

She did not reply. She was still far from the breaking point. Her nerves were calm, but her mind was obviously racing at top speed, seeking some avenue of escape.

"I'm not saying anything more," she declared. She sat down and pulled the hem of her négligée over her bare knees.

"Suit yourself." Maigret made himself comfortable in a chair opposite her.

"Are you going to stay here all night?" she asked.

"At least until your husband gets home."

"Are you going to tell him about Monsieur Lorilleux's visits to my room?"

"If necessary."

"You're a cad! Jean knows nothing about all this. He had no part in it."

"Unfortunately he is your husband."

When Lucas came back, they were staring at each other in silence.

"Janvier is taking care of the letter, Chief. I met Torrence downstairs. He says the man is in that little bar, two doors down from your house."

She sprang up. "What man?"

Maigret didn't move a muscle. "The man who came here last night. You must have expected him to come back, since he didn't find what he was looking for. And he might be in a different frame of mind this time."

She cast a dismayed glance at the clock. The train from Bergerac was due in twenty minutes. Her husband could be home in 40. She asked: "You know who this man is?"

"I can guess. I could go down and confirm my suspicion. I'd say it is Lorilleux and I'd say he is very eager to get back his property."

"It's not his property!"

"Let's say that, rightly or wrongly, he considers it his property. He must be in desperate straits, this man. He came to see you twice without getting what he wanted. He came back a third time disguised as Father Christmas. And he'll come back again. He'll be surprised to find you have company. I'm convinced that he'll be more talkative than you. Despite the general belief, men always speak more freely than women. Do you think he is armed?"

"I don't know."

"I think he is. He is tired of waiting. I don't know what story you've been telling him, but I'm sure he's fed up with it. The gentleman has a vicious face. There's nothing quite as cruel as a weakling with his back up."

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"Shut up!"

"Would you like us to go so that you can be alone with him?"

The back of Maigret's envelope contained the following note: "10:38 P.M. — she decides to talk."

It was not a very connected story at first. It came out in bits and pieces, fragments of sentences interlarded with venomous asides, supplemented by Maigret's own guesses which she either confirmed or amended.

"What do you want to know?"

"Was it money that you left in the check room?"

"Bank notes. Almost a million."

"Did the money belong to Lorilleux?"

"No more to him than to me."

"To one of his customers?"

"Yes. A man named Julian Boissy."

"What became of him?"

"He died."

"How?"

"He was killed."

"By whom?"

"By Monsieur Lorilleux."

"Why?"

"Because I gave him to understand that if he could raise enough money — real money — I might run away with him."

"You were already married?"

"Yes."

"You're not in love with your husband?"

"I despise mediocrity. All my life I've been poor. All my life I've been surrounded by people who have had to scrimp and save, people who have had to sacrifice and count centimes. I've had to scrimp and sacrifice and count centimes myself." She turned savagely on Maigret, as if he had been responsible for all her troubles. "I just didn't want to be poor any more."

"Would you have gone away with Lorilleux?"

"I don't know. Perhaps for a while."

"Long enough to get your hands on his money?"

"I hate you!"

"How was Boissy murdered?"

"Monsieur Boissy was a regular customer of long standing."

"Pornographic literature?"

"He was a lascivious old goat, sure. So are all men. So is Lorilleux. So are you, probably. Boissy was a widower. He lived alone in a hotel room. He was very rich and very stingy. All rich people are stingy."

"That doesn't work both ways, does it? You, for instance, are not rich."

"I would have been rich."

"If Lorilleux had not come back. How did Boissy die?"

"The devaluation of the franc scared him out of his wits. Like everybody else at that time, he wanted gold. Monsieur Lorilleux used to shuttle gold in from Switzerland pretty regularly. And he always demanded payment in advance. One afternoon Monsieur Boissy came to the shop with a fortune in currency. I wasn't there. I had gone out on an errand."

"You planned it that way?"

"No."

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"You had no idea what was going to happen?"

"No. Don't try to put words in my mouth. When I came back, Lorilleux was packing the body into a big box."

"And you blackmailed him?"

"No."

"Then why did he disappear after having given you the money?"

"I frightened him."

"You threatened to go to the police?"

"No. I merely told him that our neighbors in the Palais-Royal had been looking at me suspiciously and that I thought he ought to put the money in a safe place for a while. I told him about the loose floor board in my apartment. He thought it would only be for a few days. Two days later he asked me to cross the Belgian frontier with him."

"And you refused?"

"I told him I'd been stopped and questioned by a man who looked like a police inspector. He was terrified. I gave him some of the money and promised to join him in Brussels as soon as it was safe."

"What did he do with the corpse?"

"He put the box in a taxi and drove to a little country house he owned on the banks of the Marne. I suppose he either buried it there or threw it into the river. Nobody ever missed Monsieur Boissy."

"So you sent Lorilleux to Belgium without you. How did you keep him away for five years?"

"I used to write him, general delivery. I told him the police were after him, and that he probably would read nothing about it in the papers because they were setting a trap for him. I told him the police were always coming back to question me. I even sent him to South America."

"He came back two months ago?"

"About. He was at the end of his rope."

"Didn't you send him any money?"

"Not much."

"Why not?"

She did not reply. She looked at e clock.

"Are you going to arrest me? What will be the charge? I didn't kill Boissy. I wasn't there when he was killed. I had nothing to do with disposing of his body."

"Stop worrying about yourself. You kept the money because all your life you wanted money — not to spend, but to keep, to feel secure, to feel rich and free from want."

"That's my business."

"When Lorilleux came back to ask for money, or to ask you to keep your promise and run away with him, you used Colette as a pretext. You tried to scare him into leaving the country again, didn't you?"

"He stayed in Paris, hiding." Her upper lip curled slightly. "What an idiot! He could have shouted his name from the housetops and nobody would have noticed."

"The business of Father Christmas wasn't idiotic."

"No? The money wasn't under the

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floorboard any longer. It was right here under his nose, in my sewing basket."

"Your husband will be here in ten or fifteen minutes. Lorilleux across the street probably knows it. He's been in touch with Bergerac by phone, and he can read a timetable. He's surely armed. Do you want to wait here for your two men?"

"Take me away! I'll slip on a dress. . . ."

"The check-room stub?"

"General delivery, Boulevard Beaumarchais."

She did not close the bedroom door after her. Brazenly she dropped the négligée from her shoulders and sat on the edge of the bed to pull on her stockings. She selected a woolen dress from the closet, tossed toilet articles and lingerie into an overnight bag.

"Let's hurry!"

"Your husband?"

"That fool? Leave him for the birds."

"Colette?"

She shrugged.

Mlle. Doncoeur's door opened a crack as they passed.

Downstairs on the sidewalk she clung fearfully to the two men, peering into the fog.

"Take her to the Quai des Orfèvres, Lucas. I'm staying here."

She held back. There was no car in sight, and she was obviously frightened by the prospect of walking into the night with only Lucas to protect her. Lucas was not very big.

"Don't be afraid. Lorilleux is not in this vicinity."

"You lied to me! You — you —"

Maigret went back into the house.

The conference with Jean Martin lasted two hours.

When Maigret left the house at one thirty, the two brothers were in serious conversation. There was a crack of light under Mlle. Doncoeur's door, but she did not open the door as he passed.

When he got home, his wife was asleep in a chair in the dining room. His place at table was still set. Mme. Maigret awoke with a start.

"You're alone?" When he looked at her with amused surprise, she added, "Didn't you bring the little girl home?"

"Not tonight. She's asleep. You can go for her tomorrow morning."

"Why, then we're going to . . ."

"No, not permanently. Jean Martin may console himself with some decent girl. Or perhaps his brother will get back on his feet and find a new wife. . . ."

"In other words, she won't be ours?"

"Not in fee simple, no. Only on loan. I thought that would be better than nothing. I thought it would make you happy."

"Why, yes, of course. It will make me very happy. But . . . but . . ."

She sniffled once and fumbled for her handkerchief. When she couldn't find it, she buried her face in her apron.

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When it first appeared in an American magazine, Agatha Christie's "The Disappearance of Captain Harwell" was titled "A Man of Magic"; and when it later appeared in book form it was called "At the Bells and Motley." By any name, it is one of the finest of Agatha Christie's Harley Quin-Mr. Satterthwaite stories. Harley Quin, you will recall, is Miss Christie's mystic detective — always a challenging and courageous test for any author's prowess. And Miss Christie has passed that test with highest marks: Harley Quin ranks with the very best mystical sleuths, perhaps because he believes that crimes should be investigated long after the fact, that "one sees better afterward than at the time . . . the longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion."

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CAPTAIN HARWELL

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

MR. SATTERTHWAITE WAS ANNOYED. Altogether it had been an unfortunate day. They had started late; there had been two punctures already; finally they had taken the wrong turning and lost themselves amid the wilds of Salisbury Plain. Now it was close to 8 o'clock; they were still a matter of 40 miles from Marswick Manor, whither they were bound, and a third puncture had rendered matters still more trying.

Mr. Satterthwaite, looking like some small bird whose plumage had been ruffled, walked up and down in front of the village garage while his chauffeur conversed in hoarse undertones with the local garage mechanic.

"Half an hour *at* least," said that worthy, pronouncing judgment.

"And lucky at that," supplemented Masters, the chauffeur. "More like three-quarters if you ask me."

"What is this — place, anyway?" demanded Mr. Satterthwaite fretfully. Being a little gentleman considerate of the feelings of others, he substituted the word "place" for "God-forsaken hole" which had first risen to his lips.

"Kirtlington Mallet."

Mr. Satterthwaite was not much wiser, and yet a faint familiarity seemed to linger round the name. He looked round him disparagingly. Kirtlington Mallet seemed to consist of one straggling street, the garage and

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the post office on one side of it balanced by three indeterminate shops on the other side. Farther down the road, however, Mr. Satterthwaite perceived something that creaked and swung in the wind, and his spirits rose ever so slightly.

'There's an inn here, I see."

"Bells and Motley," said the garage man. "That's it — yonder."

"If I might make a suggestion, sir," said Masters. "Why not try it? They would be able to give you some sort of a meal, no doubt — not, of course, what you are accustomed to —" He paused apologetically, for Mr. Satterthwaite was accustomed to the best cooking of continental chefs, and had in his own service a *cordon bleu* to whom he paid a fabulous salary.

"We shan't be able to take the road again for another three-quarters of an hour, sir. I'm sure of that. And it's already past 8 o'clock. You could ring up Sir George Foster, sir, from the inn, and acquaint him with the cause of our delay."

"You seem to think you can arrange everything, Masters," said Mr. Satterthwaite snappily.

Masters, who did think so, maintained a respectful silence.

Mr. Satterthwaite, in spite of his earnest wish to discountenance any suggestion that might possibly be made to him — he was in that mood — nevertheless looked down the road toward the creaking inn sign with faint inward approval. He was a man of birdlike appetite, an epicure; but even such men can be hungry.

"The Bells and Motley," he said thoughtfully. "That's an odd name for an inn. I don't know that I ever heard it before."

"There's odd folks come to it by all account," said the local man.

He was bending over the wheel, and his voice came muffled and indistinct.

"Odd folks?" queried Mr. Satterthwaite. "Now what do you mean by that?"

The other hardly seemed to know what he meant.

"Folks that come and go. That kind," he said vaguely.

Mr. Satterthwaite reflected that people who come to an inn are almost of necessity those who "come and go." The definition seemed to him to lack precision. Nevertheless, his curiosity was stimulated. Somehow or other he had got to put in three-quarters of an hour. The Bells and Motley would be as good as anywhere else.

With his usual small, mincing steps he walked away down the road. From afar there came a rumble of thunder. The mechanic looked up and spoke to Masters:

"There's a storm coming over. Thought I could feel it in the air."

"Crikey," said Masters. "And 40 miles to go."

"Ah!" said the other. "There's no need to be hurrying over this job. You'll not be wanted to take the road till the storm's passed over. That little boss of yours doesn't look as though he'd relish being out in thunder and lightning."

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"Hope they'll do him well at that place," muttered the chauffeur. "I'll be pushing along there for a bite myself presently."

"Billy Jones is all right," said the garage man. "Keeps a good table."

Mr. William Jones, a big burly man of 50, and landlord of the Bells and Motley, was at this minute beaming ingratiatingly down on little Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Can do you a nice steak, sir — *and* fried potatoes, and as good a cheese as any gentleman could wish for. This way, sir, in the coffee room. We're not very full at present, the last of the fishing gentlemen just gone. A little later we'll be full again for the hunting. Only one gentleman here at present, name of Quin —"

Mr. Satterthwaite stopped dead.

"Quin?" he said excitedly. "Did you say Quin?"

"That's the name, sir. Friend of yours, perhaps?"

"Yes, indeed. Oh, yes, most certainly." Twittering with excitement, Mr. Satterthwaite hardly realized that the world might contain more than one man of that name. He had no doubts at all. In an odd way, the information fitted in with what the man at the garage had said. "Folks that come and go." A very apt description of Mr. Quin. And the name of the inn too seemed a peculiarly fitting and appropriate one.

"Dear me, dear me," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "What a *very* odd thing. That we should meet like this! Mr. Harley Quin, is it not?"

"That's right, sir. This is the coffee room, sir. Ah, here is the gentleman."

Tall, dark, smiling, the familiar figure of Mr. Quin rose from the table at which he was sitting, and the well-remembered voice spoke.

"Ah! Mr. Satterthwaite, we meet again. An unexpected meeting!"

Mr. Satterthwaite was shaking him warmly by the hand.

"Delighted. Delighted, I'm sure. A lucky breakdown for me. My car, you know. And you are staying here? For long?"

"One night only."

"Then I am indeed fortunate."

Mr. Satterthwaite sat down opposite his friend with a little sigh of satisfaction, and regarded the dark, smiling face opposite him with a pleasurable expectancy.

The other man shook his head.

"I assure you," he said, "that I have not a bowl of goldfish or a rabbit to produce from my sleeve."

"Too bad," cried Mr. Satterthwaite, a little taken aback. "Yes, I must confess — I do rather adopt that attitude toward you. A man of magic. Ha, ha. That is how I regard you. A man of magic."

"And yet," said Mr. Quin, "it is you who do the conjuring tricks, not I."

"Ah!" said Mr. Satterthwaite eagerly. "But I cannot do them without you. I lack — shall we say — inspiration?"

Mr. Quin smilingly shook his head.

"That is too big a word. I speak the cure, that is all."

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The landlord came in at that minute with bread and a slab of butter. As he set the things on the table there was a vivid flash of lightning, and a clap of thunder almost overhead.

"A wild night, gentlemen."

"On such a night—" began Mr. Satterthwaite, and stopped.

"Funny now," interrupted the landlord, "if those weren't just the words I was going to use myself. It was just such a night as this when Captain Harwell brought his bride home, the very day before he disappeared forever."

"Ah!" cried Mr. Satterthwaite, suddenly. "Of course!"

He had got the clue. He knew now why the name Kirtlington Mallet was familiar. Three months before he had read every detail of the astonishing disappearance of Captain Richard Harwell. Like other newspaper readers all over Great Britain he had puzzled over the details of the disappearance, and, also like every other Briton, had evolved his own theories.

"Of course," he repeated. "It was at Kirtlington Mallet it happened."

"It was at this house he stayed for the hunting last winter," said the landlord. "Oh, I knew him well. A handsome young gentleman and not one that you'd think had a care on his mind. He was done away with—that's my belief. Many's the time I've seen them come riding home together—he and Miss Le Couteau, and all the village saying there'd be a match come of it—and sure enough, so it did. A very beautiful young lady, and well thought of, for all she was a Canadian and a stranger. Ah, there's some dark mystery there. We'll never know the rights of it. It broke her heart. It did, sure enough. You've heard as she's sold the place and gone abroad; couldn't bear to go on here with everyone staring and pointing after her—through no fault of her own, poor young dear? A black mystery, that's what it is."

He shook his head, then, suddenly recollecting his duties, hurried from the room.

"A black mystery," said Mr. Quin softly.

His voice was provocative in Mr. Satterthwaite's ears. "Are you pretending that we can solve the mystery where Scotland Yard failed?" he asked sharply.

The other made a characteristic gesture.

"Why not? Time has passed. Three months. That makes a difference."

"That is a curious idea of yours," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "That one sees things better afterward than at the time."

"The longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion. One sees them in their true relationship to one another."

There was a silence which lasted for some minutes.

"I am not sure," said Mr. Satterthwaite, in a hesitating voice, "that I remember the facts clearly by now."

"I think you do," said Mr. Quin quietly.

It was all the encouragement Mr.

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Satterthwaite needed. His general role in life was that of listener and looker-on. Only in the company of Mr. Quin was the position reversed. There Mr. Quin was the appreciative listener, and Mr. Satterthwaite took the center of the stage.

"It was just over a year ago," he said, "that Ashley Grange passed into the possession of Miss Eleanor Le Couteau. It is a beautiful old house, but it had been neglected and allowed to remain empty for many years. It could not have found a better chatelaine. Miss Le Couteau was a French Canadian, her forbears were *émigrés* from the French Revolution, and had handed down to her a collection of almost priceless French relics and antiques. She was a buyer and a collector also, with a very fine and discriminating taste, so much so that, when she decided to sell Ashley Grange and everything it contained after the tragedy, Mr. Cyrus G. Bradburn, the American millionaire, made no bones about paying the fancy price of £60,000 for the Grange as it stood."

Mr. Satterthwaite paused.

"I mention these things," he said apologetically, "not because they are relevant to the story — strictly speaking, they are not, but to convey an atmosphere — the atmosphere of young Mrs. Harwell."

Mr. Quin nodded. "Atmosphere is always valuable," he said gravely.

"So we get a picture of this girl," continued the other. "Just twenty-three, dark, beautiful, accomplished, nothing crude and unfinished about her. And rich — we must not forget that. She was an orphan. A Mrs. St. Clair, a lady of unimpeachable breeding and social standing, lived with her as duenna. But Eleanor Le Couteau had complete control of her own fortune. And fortune hunters are never hard to seek. At least a dozen impecunious young men were to be found dangling round her on all occasions, in the hunting field, in the ballroom, wherever she went. Young Lord Leccan, the most eligible in the county, is reported to have asked her to marry him, but she remained heart-free. That is, until the coming of Captain Richard Harwell.

"Captain Harwell had put up at the local inn for the hunting. He was a dashing rider to hounds, a handsome, laughing daredevil of a fellow. You remember the old saying, Mr. Quin? 'Happy the wooing that's not long doing.' The adage was carried out at least in part. At the end of two months Richard Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau were engaged.

"The marriage followed three months afterwards. The happy pair went abroad for a two weeks' honeymoon, and then returned to take up their residence at Ashley Grange. The landlord has just told us that it was on a night of storm such as this that they returned to their home. An omen, I wonder? Who can tell. Be that as it may, the following morning very early — about half-past 7 — Captain Harwell was seen walking in the garden by one of the gardeners, John Mathias. He was bareheaded,

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and was whistling. We have a picture there, a picture of light-heartedness, of careless happiness. And yet from that minute, as far as we know, no one ever set eyes on Captain Richard Harwell again."

Mr. Satterthwaite paused, pleasantly conscious of a dramatic moment. The admiring glance of Mr. Quin gave him the tribute he needed, and he went on.

"The disappearance was remarkable — unaccountable. It was not till the following day that the distracted wife called in the police. As you know, they have not succeeded in solving the mystery."

"There have, I suppose, been theories?" asked Mr. Quin.

"Oh, theories, I grant you. Theory No. 1, that Captain Harwell had been murdered, done away with. But if so, where was the body? It could hardly have been spirited away. And besides, what motive was there? As far as was known, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world."

He paused abruptly, as though uncertain. Mr. Quin leaned forward.

"You are thinking," he said softly, "of young Stephen Grant."

"I am," admitted Mr. Satterthwaite. "Stephen Grant, if I remember rightly, had been in charge of Captain Harwell's horses, and had been discharged by his master for some trifling offense. On the morning after the homecoming, very early, Stephen Grant was seen in the vicinity of Ashley Grange, and could give no good account of his presence there. He was detained by the police as being concerned in the disappearance of Captain Harwell, but nothing could be proved against him, and he was eventually discharged. It is true that he might be supposed to bear a grudge against Captain Harwell for his summary dismissal, but the motive was undeniably of the flimsiest. I suppose the police felt they must do something. You see, as I said just now, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world."

"As far as was known," said Mr. Quin reflectively.

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded appreciatively.

"We are coming to that. What, after all, *was* known of Captain Harwell? When the police came to look into his antecedents they were confronted with a singular paucity of material. Who was Richard Harwell? Where did he come from? He had appeared, literally out of the blue, as it seemed. He was a magnificent rider, and apparently well off. Nobody in Kirtlington Mallet had bothered to inquire further. Miss Le Couteau had had no parents or guardians to make inquiries into the prospects and standing of her fiancé. She was her own mistress. The police theory at this point was clear enough. A rich girl and an impudent imposter. The old story!

"But it was not quite that. True, Miss Le Couteau had no parents or guardians, but she had an excellent firm of solicitors in London who acted for her. Their evidence made the

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mystery deeper. Eleanor Le Couteau had wished to settle a sum outright upon her prospective husband, but he had refused. He himself was well off, he declared. It was proved conclusively that Harwell never had a penny of his wife's money. Her fortune was absolutely intact.

"He was, therefore, no common swindler; but was his object a refinement of the art? Did he propose blackmail at some future date if Eleanor Harwell should wish to marry some other man? I will admit that something of that kind seemed to me the most likely solution. It has always seemed so to me — until tonight."

Mr. Quin leaned forward, prompting him.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight I am not satisfied with that. How did he manage to disappear so suddenly and completely — at that hour in the morning, with every laborer bestirring himself and tramping to work? Bareheaded, too."

"There is no doubt about that latter point — since the gardener saw him?"

"Yes, the gardener — John Mathias. Was there anything there, I wonder?"

"The police would not overlook him," said Mr. Quin.

"They questioned him closely. He never wavered in his statement. His wife bore him out. He left his cottage at 7 to attend to the greenhouses, he returned at twenty minutes to 8. The servants in the house heard the front door slam at about a quarter after 7. That fixes the time when Captain Harwell left the house. Ah, yes, I know what you are thinking."

"Do you, I wonder?" said Mr. Quin.

"I fancy so. Time enough for Mathias to have made away with his master. But why, man, why? And if so, where did he hide the body?"

The landlord came in bearing a tray.

"Sorry to have kept you so long, gentlemen."

He set upon the table a mammoth steak and beside it a dish filled to overflowing with crisp brown potatoes. The odor from the dishes was pleasant to Mr. Satterthwaite's nostrils. He felt gracious.

"This looks excellent," he said. "Most excellent. We have been discussing the disappearance of Captain Harwell. What became of the gardener Mathias?"

"Took a place in Essex, I believe. Didn't care to stay hereabouts. There were some as looked askance at him, you understand. Not that I ever believed he had anything to do with it."

Mr. Satterthwaite helped himself to steak. Mr. Quin followed suit. The landlord seemed disposed to linger and chat. Mr. Satterthwaite had no objection; on the contrary.

"This Mathias now," he said. "What kind of a man was he?"

"Middle-aged chap, must have been a powerful fellow once, but bent and crippled with rheumatism. He had that mortal bad, was laid up

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many a time with it, unable to do any work. For my part, I think it was sheer kindness on Miss Eleanor's part to keep him on. He'd outgrown his usefulness as a gardener, though his wife managed to make herself useful up at the house. Been a cook, she had, and aways willing to lend a hand."

"What sort of a woman was she?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite, quickly.

The landlord's answer disappointed him.

"A plain body. Middle-aged, and dour-like in manner. Deaf, too. Not that I ever knew much of them. They'd only been here a month, you understand, when the thing happened. They say he'd been a rare good gardener in his time, though. Wonderful testimonials Miss Eleanor had with him."

"Was she interested in gardening?" asked Mr. Quin softly.

"No, sir, I couldn't say that she was, not like some of the ladies round here who pay good money to gardeners and spend the whole of their time grubbing about on their knees as well. Foolishness I call it. You see, Miss Le Couteau wasn't here very much except in the winter for the hunting. The rest of the time she was up in London and away in those foreign seaside places where they say the French ladies don't so much as put a toe into the water for fear of spoiling their costumes, or so I've heard."

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

"There was no — er — woman of any kind mixed up with Harwell?"

Though his first theory was disposed of, he nevertheless clung to his idea.

Mr. William Jones shook his head. "Nothing of that sort. Never a whisper of it. No, it's a dark mystery, that's what it is."

"And your theory? What do you yourself think?" persisted Mr. Satterthwaite.

"What do *I* think?"

"Yes."

"Don't know what to think. It's my belief as how he was done in, but who by I can't say. I'll fetch you gentlemen the cheese."

He stumped from the room bearing empty dishes. The storm, which had been quieting down, suddenly broke out with redoubled vigor. A flash of forked lightning and a great clap of thunder close upon each other made little Mr. Satterthwaite jump, and before the last echoes of the thunder had died away, a girl came into the room carrying the cheese.

She was tall and dark, and handsome in a sullen fashion of her own. Her likeness to the landlord of the Bells and Motley was apparent enough to proclaim her his daughter.

"Good evening, Mary," said Mr. Quin. "A stormy night."

She nodded.

"I hate these stormy nights," she muttered.

"You are afraid of thunder, perhaps?" said Mr. Satterthwaite kindly.

"Afraid of thunder? Not me! There's little that I'm afraid of. No, but the storm sets them off. Talking, talking, the same thing over and over

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again, like a lot of parrots. Father begins it: 'It reminds me, this does, of the night poor Captain Harwell —' And so on, and so on." She turned on Mr. Quin. "You've heard how he goes on. What's the sense of it? Can't anyone let past things be?"

"A thing is only past when it is done with," said Mr. Quin.

"Isn't this done with? Suppose he wanted to disappear? These fine gentlemen do sometimes."

"You think he disappeared of his own free will?"

"Why not? It would make better sense than to suppose a kind-hearted creature like Stephen Grant murdered him. What should he murder him for, I should like to know? Stephen had had a drop too much one day and spoke to him saucy like, and got the sack for it. But what of it? He got another place just as good. Is that a reason to murder a man in cold blood?"

"But surely," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "the police were quite satisfied of his innocence."

"The police! What do the police matter? When Stephen comes into the bar of an evening, every man looks at him queer like. They don't really believe he murdered Harwell, but they're not sure, and so they look at him sideways and edge away. Nice life for a man, to see people shrink away from you, as though you were something different from the rest of folks. Why won't Father hear of our getting married, Stephen and I? 'You can take your pigs to a better market, my girl. I've nothing against Stephen, but — well, we don't know, do we?' "

She stopped, her breast heaving with the violence of her resentment.

"It's cruel, cruel, that's what it is," she burst out. "Stephen, that wouldn't hurt a fly! And all through life there'll be people who'll think he did it. It's turning him queer and bitter like. I don't wonder, I'm sure. And the more he's like that, the more people think there must have been something in it."

Again she stopped. Her eyes were fixed on Mr. Quin's face, as though something in it was drawing this outburst from her.

"Can nothing be done?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He was genuinely distressed. The thing was, he saw, inevitable. The very vagueness and unsatisfactoriness of the evidence against Stephen Grant made it the more difficult for him to disprove the accusation.

The girl whirled round on him.

"Nothing but the truth can help him," she cried. "If the true rights of it were only known —"

She broke off with something very like a sob, and hurried quickly from the room.

"A fine-looking girl," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "A sad case altogether. I wish — I very much wish that something could be done about it."

His kind heart was troubled.

"We are doing what we can," said Mr. Quin. "There is still nearly half an hour before your car can be ready."

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Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him.

"You think we can come at the truth just by — talking it over like this?"

"You have seen much of life," said Mr. Quin gravely. "More than most people."

"Life has passed me by," said Mr. Satterthwaite bitterly.

"But in so doing has sharpened your vision. Where others are blind you can see."

"It is true," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I am a great observer."

He plumed himself complacently. The moment of bitterness was past.

"I look at it like this," he said after a minute or two. "To get at the cause for a thing, we must study the effect."

"Very good," said Mr. Quin approvingly.

"The effect in this case is that Miss Le Couteau — Mrs. Harwell, I mean — is a wife and yet not a wife. She is not free — she cannot marry again. And look at it as we will, we see Richard Harwell as a sinister figure, a man from nowhere with a mysterious past."

"I agree," said Mr. Quin. "You see what all are bound to see, what cannot be missed, Captain Harwell in the limelight, a suspicious figure."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him doubtfully. The words seemed somehow to suggest a faintly different picture to his mind.

"We have studied the effect," he said. "Or call it the *result*. We can now pass —"

Mr. Quin interrupted him.

"You have not touched on the result on the strictly material side."

"You are right," said Mr. Satterthwaite, after a moment or two for consideration. "One should do the thing thoroughly. Let us say then that the result of the tragedy is that Mrs. Harwell is a wife and not a wife, unable to marry again, that Mr. Cyrus Bradburn has been able to buy Ashley Grange and its contents for — £60,000, was it? — and that somebody in Essex has been able to secure John Mathias as a gardener! For all that, we do not suspect 'somebody in Essex' or Mr. Cyrus Bradburn of having engineered the disappearance of Captain Harwell."

"You are sarcastic," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked sharply at him.

"But surely you agree —"

"Oh, I agree," said Mr. Quin. "The idea is absurd. What next?"

"Let us imagine ourselves back on the fatal day. The disappearance has taken place, let us say, this very morning."

"No, no," said Mr. Quin, smiling. "Since, in our imagination at least, we have power over time, let us turn it the other way. Let us say the disappearance of Captain Harwell took place a hundred years ago. That we, in the year 2053, are looking back."

"You are a strange man," said Mr. Satterthwaite slowly. "You believe in the past, not the present. Why?"

"You used, not long ago, the word

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atmosphere. There is no atmosphere in the present."

"That is true, perhaps," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "Yes, it is true. The present is apt to be — parochial."

"A good word," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite gave a funny little bow. "You are too kind," he said.

"Let us take — not this present year, that would be too difficult, but say — last year," continued the other. "Sum it up for me, you, who have the gift of the neat phrase."

Mr. Satterthwaite thought for a minute. He was jealous of his reputation.

"A hundred years ago we have the age of powder and patches," he said. "Shall we say that 1952 was the age of crossword puzzles and cat burglars?"

"Very good," approved Mr. Quin. "You mean that nationally, not internationally, I presume?"

"As to crossword puzzles, I must confess that I do not know," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "But the cat burglar had a great inning on the Continent. You remember that series of famous thefts from French chateaux? It is surmised that one man alone could not have done it. The most miraculous feats were performed to gain admission. There was a theory that a troupe of acrobats were concerned — the Clondinis. I once saw their performance — truly masterly. A mother, son, and daughter. They vanished from the stage in a rather mysterious fashion. But we are wandering from our subject."

"Not very far," said Mr. Quin. "Only across the Channel."

"Where the French ladies will not wet their toes, according to our worthy host," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

There was a pause. It seemed somehow significant.

"Why did he disappear?" cried Mr. Satterthwaite. "Why? Why? It is incredible, a kind of conjuring trick."

"Yes," said Mr. Quin. "A conjuring trick. That describes it exactly. Atmosphere again, you see. And wherein does the essence of a conjuring trick lie?"

" 'The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,' " quoted Mr. Satterthwaite glibly.

"That is everything, is it not? To deceive the eye? Sometimes by the quickness of the eye, sometimes — by other means. There are many devices, the pistol shot, the waving of a red handkerchief, something that seems important, but in reality is not. The eye is diverted from the real business, it is caught by the spectacular action that means nothing — nothing at all."

Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward, his eyes shining.

"There is something in that. It is an idea."

He went on softly. "The pistol shot. What was the pistol shot in the conjuring trick we are discussing? What is the spectacular moment that holds the imagination?"

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He drew in his breath sharply.

"The disappearance," breathed Mr. Satterthwaite. "Take that away, and it leaves nothing."

"Nothing? Suppose things took the same course *without* that dramatic gesture?"

"You mean — supposing Miss Le Couteau were still to sell Ashley Grange to Mr. Bradburn and leave — for no reason?"

"Well?"

"Well, why not? It would have aroused talk, I suppose, there would have been a lot of interest displayed in the value of the contents, in — Ah! wait!"

He was silent a minute, then burst out.

"You are right, there is too much limelight — the limelight on Captain Harwell! And because of that, *she* has been in shadow. *Miss Le Couteau!* Everyone asking, 'Who was Captain Harwell? Where did he come from?' But because she is the injured party, no one makes inquiries about her. Was she really a French Canadian? Were those wonderful heirlooms really handed down to her? You were right when you said just now that we had not wandered far from our subject — *only across the Channel.* Those so-called heirlooms were stolen from the French chateaux, most of them valuable *objets d'art*, and in consequence difficult to dispose of. She buys the house — for a mere song, probably — settles down there and pays a good sum to an irreproachable Englishwoman to chaperone her. Then *he* comes. The plot is laid beforehand. The marriage, the disappearance, and the nine days' wonder! What more natural than that a broken-hearted woman should want to sell everything that reminds her of past happiness? The American is a connoisseur, the things are genuine and beautiful, some of them beyond price. He makes an offer, she accepts it. She leaves the neighborhood, a sad and tragic figure. The great *coup* has come off. The eye of the public has been deceived by the quickness of the hand and the spectacular nature of the trick."

Mr. Satterthwaite paused, flushed with triumph.

"But for you I should never have seen it," he said with sudden humility. "You have a most curious effect upon me. One says things so often without even seeing what they really mean. You have the knack of showing one. But it is still not quite clear to me. It must have been most difficult for Harwell to disappear as he did. After all, the police all over England were looking for him."

"They were probably looking," said Mr. Quin, "all over England."

"It would have been simplest to remain hidden at the Grange," mused Mr. Satterthwaite. "If it could be managed."

"He was, I think, very near the Grange," said Mr. Quin.

His look of significance was not lost on Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Mathias's cottage?" he exclaimed. "But the police searched it?"

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"Repeatedly, I should imagine," said Mr. Quin.

"Mathias," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"And Mrs. Mathias," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite stared hard at him.

"If that gang was really the Clondinis," he said dreamily, "there are three of them in it. The two young ones were Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau. The mother was she, Mrs. Mathias. But in that case —"

"Mathias suffered from rheumatism, did he not?" said Mr. Quin innocently.

"Oh!" cried Mr. Satterthwaite. "I have it. But could it be done? I believe it could. Listen. Mathias was there a month. During that time, Harwell and Eleanor were away for a fortnight on a honeymoon. And for the fortnight before the wedding, they were supposedly in town. A clever man could have doubled the parts of Harwell and Mathias. When Harwell was at Kirtlington Mallet, Mathias was conveniently laid up with rheumatism, with Mrs. Mathias to sustain the fiction. Her part was very necessary. Without her, someone might have suspected the truth. As you say, Harwell was hidden in Mathias's cottage. He *was* Mathias. When at last the plans matured, and Ashley Grange was sold, he and his wife gave out that they were taking a place in Essex. Exit John Mathias and his wife — forever."

There was a knock at the coffee-room door, and Masters entered.

"The car is at the door, sir," he said.

Mr. Satterthwaite was pulling on his gloves.

"The Commissioner is dining with me next week," he said importantly. "I shall put my theory — ah! — before him."

"It will be easily proved or disproved," said Mr. Quin. "A comparison of the objects at Ashley Grange with a list supplied by the French police —"

"Just so," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Rather hard luck on Mr. Bradburn."

"He can, I believe, stand the loss," said Mr. Quin.

Mr. Satterthwaite held out his hand.

"Goodbye," he said. "I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated this unexpected meeting. You are leaving here tomorrow?"

"Possibly tonight. My business here is done. I come and go, you know."

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered hearing those same words earlier in the evening. Rather curious.

He went out to the car and the waiting Masters.

Mr. Satterthwaite reclined luxuriously in the comfortable limousine. His breast was swelled with triumph. He saw the girl Mary come out on the steps.

"She little knows," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "She little knows what *I* am going to do!"

The sign of the Bells and Motley swayed gently in the wind.

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Inspector Hazlerigg recalls a "perfect" crime

MURDER BY JURY

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"POSSIBLY YOU COULD DESCRIBE THE snake," said Counsel.

"Certainly. It was gray, with a mottling of red. Not crimson, darker than that. A sort of plum-colored red."

"Yes. Go on, please."

"The underbelly, which was towards me, as it reared its head to strike, was also gray, but lighter. Toning down almost to white in the center."

"Was there anything else?"

"Yes. Its size. It was as thick as two of my wrists together."

"I see. What happened next?"

"I seized it, just below its head, with both my hands together. My hands were turned inwards. I squeezed with my fingers and dug in my thumbs, and I felt the snake twist and squirm and flog its head from side to side as it tried to escape."

"And then?"

"Then I woke up. I was kneeling beside the bed. It was my wife's neck which was between my hands and her throat I was squeezing. She was dead."

"That's an extract," said Chief Inspector Hazlerigg, "from the examination of Edward Mason, on trial for the murder of his wife, Freda Mason. In my studied opinion he was one of the most thoughtful, cold-blooded, successful murderers we ever failed to hang."

"I read about it," I said.

"He got a lot of publicity," agreed Hazlerigg. "Acquitted murderers always do. It was my case, you know. And I can see, now, that I was outmaneuvered from start to finish . . ."

The case really started at 6 o'clock in the morning in the Caledonian Hotel at Chaffham-on-Sea, a small health resort on the Norfolk coast.

It started with a succession of loud screams from a bedroom on the first floor. "Horrible and unforgettable," was how one witness described them.

The manager jumped from his bed, and, with one of the servants and two other guests, ran along to the room. The door was opened by Mr. Mason, who was apparently in a state of breakdown. He was in pajamas, dishevelled and wild-looking, the pajama jacket being torn. He kept staring at his hands and the only words he spoke, according to different accounts, were "I killed her" or "I strangled her."

The manager forced his way past, into the room, and found Mrs. Mason's body lying half out of the bed. He sent for the police and a doctor.

When Mr. Mason was fit to talk he

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made a statement, and at no time afterwards did he substantially vary this statement at all. He said that he had had a dream. He was fighting with a large snake. He took the snake in his hands and throttled it. He woke up and found that he had throttled his wife. The dream was one which he had had before, but never with fatal results.

He added that "he had loved his wife very dearly."

The local police could make nothing of this. Mr. Mason was not a local man. The fact that he had happened to kill his wife while staying at Chaffham was, they implied, entirely fortuitous. They handed the matter over, with some relief, to London and the case was given to Inspector Hazlerigg for consideration. A coroner's jury returned a quite unhelpful open verdict . . .

Hazlerigg disliked the case from the first. The essential information, as he appreciated, was locked up inside Mr. Mason's mind and provided he kept his head under cross-examination it was never going to be unlocked.

"The way I look at it is this," said Hazlerigg — he was holding an off-the-record discussion with the Director of Public Prosecutions. "Supposing we had one of those hidden witnesses you read about — I've never struck one personally, but you know the sort of chap I mean. He's up on a cliff with a telescope and he happens to be looking in at the bedroom window. He sees Mason get out of bed, walk round, bend over the bed and strangle his wife. So what? What does it prove? How are we to know if Mason was sleepwalking, or if he had all his wits about him?"

"I agree," said the Director of Public Prosecutions. "As it stands at the moment there's much less than a 50-50 chance of a conviction. If anything else turns up, well, we'll have to think again."

The next thing that turned up was Mrs. Mason's brother, Hector. He was a great big, hefty person, with a bull neck and hands like a pair of warming pans covered with red fur.

He said: "Did the police know that Mason had insured his wife's life for £10,000?"

Hazlerigg said "Yes. That did come to light. In fact, they had both insured each other's lives — not an uncommon arrangement with married people. Also, the insurance was by no means recent. It was first taken out when they married and had been successively increased. The last increase — a big one, it was true, from 5 to 10 thousand — had been made more than three years ago."

"If you'd known Ted Mason as I did," said the brother, "you'd have realized that was just like him. A far-seeing, cold-blooded fish. And another thing — that business about loving his wife was the most arrant flapjack. The two of them were hardly on speaking terms."

"Can you bring evidence of that?"

"Certainly," said brother Hector. "And one thing more. There was another woman." He gave details.

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"The fact of the killing's undenied," went on the brother. "There's your motive. If you don't prosecute I'll raise such merry hell in the Press that you'll find a new Commissioner at Scotland Yard before the year's out." . . .

"I don't think the threat moved us much," said Hazlerigg. "Our hides are so thick, that little private darts like that don't stick. But when we put the new facts up to the D.P.P. he came down on the side of prosecution. Indeed, it might be said that in fairness to Mason himself we could hardly *not* prosecute. The thing had to be cleared up.

"I may say straight away that the evidence about the other woman turned out to be quite inconclusive. The brother swore that she was Mason's mistress. She swore that she had never even seen him.

"Macrea was defending when the case came up at the Central Criminal Court, and my goodness, his handling of that brother was masterly. He went into the box looking like a cross between Bulldog Drummond and the Archangel Gabriel and when he came out there was hardly enough left of him to cover a sixpence.

"Macrea took the obvious line that Hector was a nasty-minded, prurient busybody, who had never liked his brother-in-law and had never lost any opportunity of blackening his character. How did he know about these alleged passages between his brother-in-law and this other woman? Had he been hiding behind the curtains? Or under the bed? And so on. The art of the thing was the way he got the chap admitting to the most absurd prejudices — he convicted him time and time again out of his own mouth.

"Nevertheless, making a fool out of a witness is a two-edged weapon, and when the prosecution closed I could see what was in the jury's mind as clearly as if they had said it out loud.

" 'This chap Hector may be a fool,' they were thinking. 'He didn't show up too well in the box. But that doesn't mean that everything he said is untrue. There's no smoke without a fire. And there have been one or two other witnesses who gave evidence that things were not entirely happy between Mr. and Mrs. Mason. No open quarrels, but, of course, if Mason is the deep-dyed villain the prosecution is making him out to be, he would have taken good care to avoid open quarrels. Perhaps it isn't true about the other woman — we didn't much like that part of the evidence. But you can't argue away the insurance. Mason does stand to collect £10,000. If he *didn't* murder her, then undeniably she died as the result of an accident, and the insurance company will have to pay up and look pretty. That's not disputed. But *did* he murder her? That's the simple point. Really when you get down to it, most of the evidence is practically irrelevant. That's the question we've got to answer. We are rather inclined to think that he may have done it,

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but that, of course, is not enough. We'll have to wait and see how he shapes in the box.'"

Mason made an excellent witness.

He avoided the prime fault of a prisoner who gives evidence in his own defense — he didn't protest too much.

He admitted small quarrels between himself and his wife. Married life, he said, was like that. You had differences of opinion and you made them up. The jury liked that. A lot of them were married themselves.

He dealt fully with the question of life insurance. The total amount of the benefit, he said, depended on the premiums you could afford to pay. When he was beginning in business, and his earnings were increasing slowly, he had added gradually to the annual premium. Three or four years ago he had made rather large profits and had been able to double the premium. In recent troublesome times his earnings had dropped — he was an importer — and he had not therefore been able to add to the premiums at all. He had not reduced them, because that would have been uneconomical.

("You notice incidentally," said Hazlerigg, "how neatly he gave them a point and then took it away again. The prosecution would certainly have elicited, in cross-examination, that he had recently been losing money and this would have constituted an extra motive for murder. By announcing the fact in advance he robbed it of half its sting.")

Mason denied flatly ever having seen or spoken to the other woman in the case.

Of the events which led up to the strangling of his wife he spoke almost objectively, without any undue display of emotion. He was always ready to give the fullest and most careful details, and he never contradicted himself. And even so, he avoided sounding too pat. He would remember some extra detail when questioned, or introduce some unimportant point, confessing that he had forgotten about it before. If he was lying, people couldn't help feeling that it was some of the most perfect and painstaking lying they had ever heard.

Nevertheless, the jury were not quite happy about it.

Juries go further by instinct than people think. And as every additional fact pointed the other way, their instincts only told them more clearly that the man in the dock was a dangerous man. Had they been forced to put their feelings into words, the only sort of argument they could have put up was something like this: "The facts show that he did strangle her. He is plainly a quiet, controlled sort of person — not, on the face of it, very likely to have nightmares and to run amok. We would like some positive evidence that what he says is true. That he really did it in his sleep."

Looking back on it, in the light of after-knowledge, one can see that this was precisely the point which Mason wished them to reach. The timing of his defense was admirable.

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Having erected this thin screen of doubt he proceeded to demolish it.

The next witness was his sister.

She was two years older than he was. A gray-haired woman, a middle-class intellectual, and a good witness.

She started by recalling when she had slept with her brother — at a time when such a practice was respectable and indeed normal, their ages being ten and eight respectively. She remembered very well the night when her brother had had a dream and had tried to strangle her. She did not think that the dream, on that occasion, had been about a snake. So far as she recollected the incident, it had occurred on the night after they had visited a matinée performance of Peter Pan. Her brother had been very alarmed by the crocodile in the next to the last act — the jury would probably remember it — and he had dreamed that the crocodile was chasing him. He had turned on her and got a good grip of her throat. He was a strong boy for eight and if nurse hadn't come running in she didn't like to think what might have happened.

Cross-examination could make very little headway against this. She agreed that it was a long time ago, but an experience like that was not a thing which one was likely to forget. She particularly remembered it because from then on — until Edward finally went to boarding school — she had not been allowed to sleep in the same room with him.

You could see that the jury were shaken.

The next two witnesses completed the job.

The first — I won't give you her real name — we'll call her Lulu.

Macrea, introducing the witness, indicated that there might be passages in her evidence which would give offense, but plainly where life and death were involved, certain reticences had to go by the board.

Lulu proved to be a pleasant and extremely self-possessed woman in her middle thirties. She was now leading a life of extreme rectitude, but she admitted — as the dullest member of the jury by now appreciated — that she had at one time been on the streets. She was giving her evidence of her own free will and because she couldn't stand by and see a man accused of something he obviously hadn't done.

Three or four years ago she had spent the night with the prisoner. It was the only time she had ever set eyes on him, but it wasn't an occasion she was going to forget in a hurry. At about 6 in the morning she had wakened to find him throttling her.

She was a strong and active woman and she had managed to fight her way free.

He had produced some garbled story about a dream and a snake, to which she had not-paid much attention, being at the time both frightened and furiously angry.

The prisoner, however, had behaved very handsomely. He had given her £10 to soothe her feelings, and — more — had appeared so genuinely

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anxious and upset that she hadn't the heart to take the matter further. Her first intention had been to go to the police.

When Counsel for the Crown got up to cross-examine he found himself in a position of unexpected difficulty.

It is easy enough to throw ridicule on these poor women, and their evidence doesn't often count for a great deal in a court of law. But the fact of the matter was that she was plainly risking a wounding cross-examination together with a lot of calumny and unpleasant notoriety with no possible motive except to save an innocent man.

In a way, the more he hurt her, the less good he did to the Crown's case.

One must remember, too, that the witness had been sprung on him. Macrea had made it plain that the prisoner had been against Lulu giving evidence at all. It was at her insistence, and because his advisers had thought it essential, that she had been allowed to speak.

There was only one line that the prosecution could follow — and they hunted it for all it was worth. The whole story, they said, was a fabrication. It had never happened. The prisoner had simply purchased the testimony of this woman to bolster up his own defense. On the face of it, asked the prosecution, did the prisoner look the sort of man who could have had associations with a woman of this type?

Macrea must have grinned.

His next, and final, witness was the doctor who had attended Lulu for bruises on her throat. He confirmed the date from his attendance diary. He also recognized the prisoner, who had come with Lulu and settled the bill.

The jury acquitted without retiring.

"And if I'd been on the jury I should have done the same," I said. "The man was innocent."

"He was guilty," said Hazlerigg.

"Then the evidence was faked —"

"On the contrary. Every witness spoke the truth according to their lights. So far as that goes, even Mason himself spoke the truth, about everything except the one vital point — what went on inside his own head."

"Are you asking me to believe," I said slowly, "that Mason was such a diabolical man that he started plotting the murder of his own wife at the age of *eight*?"

Hazlerigg put back his head and laughed heartily. He rocked with laughter. While he was laughing I began, dimly, to see the weakness in my argument.

"Now don't start blaming yourself," said Hazlerigg. "Because that's exactly what every member of the jury thought, in that instant when they acquitted him. After all, you can't expect all jurymen to be practising philosophers. If they had only been acquainted with the dialectical trick known as deception by series."

"Explain."

"All right. I'll give you an example of the basic notion. Then when you

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want to plan your own murder you can work out the details for yourself. Supposing I have to deceive you about — say — the number of my house. For some reason it's not practical to alter the number plate itself. But I can take it down altogether or hide it. I lead you up the street, and point out that the two houses before you come to mine are numbered 2 and 4. You won't need much convincing, then, about the number of my house, will you?"

"Six."

"So you might think. Actually my house is 4. I altered the number plate of the house on the left — which was really 3."

When I'd worked this one out on the back of an envelope, I said, "I think I see it. You mean that Mason —"

"When he decided to murder his wife about three years before he actually did it, he took a precaution. He remembered the incident of himself and his sister. I have no doubt the story was perfectly true, though it may have become exaggerated a little with the passing of the years. Just the sort of thing any excitable little boy might have done. He knew that his sister remembered it, too. Having got his true 'number,' he thereupon manufactured the false 'number.' He went out and picked up this woman — Lulu. He slept with her. In the early hours of the morning he started to strangle her. He didn't go very far, of course, just far enough to produce some convincing bruises on the throat. Then he quieted her down by paying her a good deal of money — I don't suppose she'd really have gone to the police, you know, they're shy birds — and he took her to a doctor and paid for the necessary medical attention. Incidentally, it was about the same time, did you notice, that he doubled his wife's insurance. Then he let three years go by. Then he strangled her."

"Knowing that any jury with those facts would acquit him."

"Yes. There was just one practical difficulty, and he surmounted that as well. His three witnesses were his sister, the doctor, and Lulu. The sister he would always be able to get hold of. The doctor — even if he retired — would be in some medical directory or easily traceable. The girl was different. They move, from time to time, and get swallowed up very easily in the whirlpool of the West End. How was he to keep track of her unobtrusively? The method he adopted was to send her £10 a month, anonymously. He represented himself as some well-wisher who had received her favors in the past and wished to make this periodical contribution. So long as she kept him notified of any change of address, he would continue to send her the money."

"But if she had to notify him when she moved, surely she must have known who he was."

"No — the notification had to be sent to him at a Post Restante under an assumed name."

"How long did it take to find out?"

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"Well, it took some weeks. We were only doing it to satisfy our own curiosity. But in the end we found the Post Restante and the girl gave us a definite identification. She picked Mason's photograph unhesitatingly out of a dozen others. He'd been calling for letters on and off for the last three years."

"Wasn't he running a considerable risk," I said. "Supposing you'd got on to this before —"

"When the defense are allowed to spring last-minute witnesses on you!" said Hazlerigg. "How do you think we were going to unearth all this in five minutes between examination and cross-examination? That's why they kept Lulu up their sleeve until the last moment."

"So you're absolutely certain that Mason did this murder, but you can do nothing at all about it. That's it, isn't it? You can't try him again, of course, for the same offense."

"That's what he thought," said Hazlerigg. He was smiling, but his gray eyes were bleak.

"Some time later — more than a year after the trial — Mason was staying at a little hotel in Cornwall. He was still single — I never had much confidence in that story of the other woman. Even if it was true he certainly never married her. He had a bedroom with a small balcony overlooking the cliff with a straight drop onto the rocks. The maid went to call him one morning, found the window unlatched and the balcony rail broken. What was left of Mason was among the rocks, 50 feet below."

"Then you were wrong," I said. "You were all wrong, from beginning to end. He did walk in his sleep."

"Possibly," said Hazlerigg. "Possibly. There was certainly no sign of foul play. One curious coincidence came to light later. Brother Hector had the room next door."

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly paced mystery-thrillers, all MERCURY PUBLICATIONS, are now on sale at your newsstand:

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Black Mask Magazine . . .

Here is another original story for our Black Mask department. The story is tough, sinewy, realistic, sexy, atmospheric, introspective; it has that sense of delayed action, that brooding mood, that private-eye kind of personal involvement, that we have come to associate with the hardboiled school. Thus it fits our Black Mask section to a 'tec T . . .

The author, Morton Wolson, tells us that with the folding of so many pulp magazines he now faces, at the age of 40, "the need to launch a new career. Any new career must involve writing because my background qualifies me for little else, my background including such oddly assorted and poorly remunerative skills as hopping fast freights, wheedling back-door handouts, peddling fish in Texas, pitching hay in Colorado, picking fruit in California, scraping and painting metal decks at sea, soldiering in a couple of armies, hoboing in Mexico, arguing Buddhism in Calcutta, ushering on Broadway, clerking in department stores, shifting warehouse crates, etc." There is no royal road to writing . . .

No royal road, indeed . . . Between World Wars One and Two, the author, under the pen-name of Peter Paige, earned his living from the pulps at a cent-a-word (sometimes a cent-and-a-half). Then "Cap" Shaw, editor of Black Mask, prodded "Peter Paige" toward the so-called "higher things," but the results proved either "too ambitious or too arty."

Mr. Wolson's memories of that grand old man, "Cap" Shaw, are especially illuminating. Do you know how Cap Shaw interpreted "the Black Mask touch"? In a single word — glamor. To Cap Shaw "glamor" meant the entanglement of decent people in the machinations of muggs and thugs. He always told his writers: "The menace, the threat of impending violence must shadow the entire plot." But the violence — and this is important to a true understanding of the hardboiled school — should erupt only if it became absolutely necessary; no violence merely for the sake of violence. And when the violence did erupt, it should come toward the end of the story — "action," said Cap Shaw, "kills suspense." (How little the imitators of Hammett and Chandler know of their own medium!)

Mr. Wolson acknowledges that his "debt to Cappy is enormous. He handled my output for nine years for a piddling return. He never kicked a story in the teeth, no matter how trite it was. He pulled a weak story apart and reassembled it. He had a teen-ager's capacity for enthusiasm.

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Were he around now to see me break into EQMM, he'd have reacted as if we had copped a Nobel Prize."

Who among us does not owe an enormous debt to Cap Shaw and to the Black Mask type of detective story he did so much to foster, develop, and bring to its highest estate?

THE ATTACKER

by MORTON WOLSON

CAUGHT IN THE FOCUS OF SPOTlights from three patrol cars, the blonde stood defiant, resisting an intern, Sergeant Murphy, and hysteria. In that order.

This was evident as Patrolman Jaffe braked my sedan on the footpath alongside the ambulance. The blonde screamed alternately at the intern and Murphy, who respectively wheedled and shouted back at her.

No onlookers. At 3 in the morning, following a slight shower, deep in Riverside Park, any onlooker would have been booked on suspicion automatically.

My stomach tightened as Plainclothesman Carson drifted to my window. "I found her unconscious, Captain."

"Where?"

He pointed to a KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign. "Alongside that. She came to just before the ambulance got here. Her story's different. So's she."

"Why doesn't she get in the ambulance?"

"Afraid of publicity. She wants us to forget it. Don't want medical attention, to make a complaint, or anything. Just we should take her to a friend's house where she'll wash and borrow a dress and then tell hubby she got lost in the subway or somethin'."

Mud smeared her from platinum coiffure to eggshell blue pumps. Her dress had been eggshell blue. No way to tell, through the grime, whether she was pretty. Probably she was. The others had been.

I listened to Sergeant Murphy damn her husband and then say: "The *guy*, honey — concentrate on the *guy!* All the time you're stallin' he's runnin'!"

"I didn't *see* him!" she screamed back. "Can't you get that through your thick head?"

Murphy switched to patient logic — at the top of his lungs. "This guy calls you to his car parked on upper Broadway. He asks you how to reach the Bronx. You step over to tell him. He shows you a gun. He makes you get in. When you're in, he clobbers you unconscious. You mean to say you can't tell us he's tall, short, fat,

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thin, young, old, light, dark — *anything?*"

She fainted.

The intern and a patrolman caught her. They got her into the ambulance. It drove off.

Murphy launched all hands on a flashlight search of the area. I asked Carson, "What's different about her, aside from her story?"

His small eyes glistened. He was a large, redheaded man with a good record on the Force. I disliked him.

"You seen her," his tone snickered. "You ever see a dame stacked like that off a burlesque runway, Cap'n?"

Instead of replying I grabbed my flashlight, stepped to the grass, and motioned him to follow.

The pattern was all wrong. She couldn't have picked up mud smears near that KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign. And he didn't take his victims to parks. He found them there. In company.

We descended the damp, grassy slope until my flash beam found a wide patch of drying mud. Across one side of it was a series of impressions that could have been made by high heels. Following an imaginary line from the prints, we descended to a thick clump of bushes about which the mud had been roiled as by a struggle.

At one point something wide and heavy had been dragged toward the shrubbery. My flash beam followed the broad trail into the bushes. A boy's face sprang into view.

And the pattern became right.

He crouched on his side, wedged among the gnarled branches. A boy of about twenty, possibly younger. His tongue and eyes protruded. Purple welts spotted his bare throat.

"That's what she's scared of," Carson breathed, kneeling at my side to peer in at the boy. "She's been two-timing her old man. It's like the others after all. We crawl in, Cap'n?"

"Homicide crawls in," I told him, rising.

I left him there to guard the body, sent Sergeant Murphy to launch the homicide machinery, then had Patrolman Jaffe drive me back to my West End apartment.

It took fifteen minutes on my phone before I could contact Williams, a rookie I had borrowed from Brooklyn.

"I muffed it, Captain," he reported unhappily.

"How?"

"I stayed with Carson until 2:30. He was around the Socony Yacht Basin. You know, on —"

"I know," I cut in. "What happened?"

"He hung around there a while smokin' and lookin' out at the boats. Then he chucked the smoke in the water and started north fast. I had to keep pretty far back because the walk along the river is wide open there. When he turned into the underpass I started runnin', but he was out of sight when I got through it —"

"Think he spotted you?"

"I don't see how, Captain."

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"We'll get three more fellows over from Brooklyn tomorrow and keep him boxed. Good night, Williams."

I broke the connection and tried to pick up my interrupted thread of sleep, but thought of Plainclothesman Carson and the case instead.

In four weeks Carson had emerged as my only suspect. Out of eight attacks he had been the first man on the scene five times. In three parks. The odds against such a coincidence were fantastic.

I thought of his preoccupation with sex, the snicker in his voice when he mentioned women, his locker at headquarters lined with nude pin-ups. All blondes.

Like the eight attack victims. All blondes.

A circumstantial basis for suspicion. But all I had.

Newspapers were getting hold of it and the Commissioner was raging. My park details had been doubled, then tripled. Parks were closed at midnight. Officers patroled the paths. Radio cars inched along behind probing searchlights. Mounted police explored the off-trail areas.

But neckers scaled fences and avoided paths and ducked low when spotlights floated by, and grew silent when footsteps or horse hooves sounded near.

And where neckers went, the attacker followed. Seeking pretty blondes. On cloudy nights. Only when clouds darkened the night sky. In the past four weeks there had been eight such nights. Eight attacks. Seven boy friends beaten into unconsciousness. And now — a corpse.

"Get him! Get him! Get him!" the Commissioner had roared, pounding his desk.

I had gone to Doctor Rosen, the Bellevue psychiatrist, who told me, "The pattern indicates a compulsive rapist. A man who has been, or fancies he's been, deeply injured by a blonde, probably on a cloudy night. His victims are proxies. He exacts vengeance on her through them."

I had told him, "We have a fellow on a park detail who seems to qualify."

"Married?"

"No. But at home he's dominated by an overblown blonde mother and two blonde sisters. The mother tried to get his pay mailed to her. On two occasions neighbors phoned the local precinct when he got into loud altercations with his sisters."

"Healthy reactions, Captain," Doctor Rosen shrugged. "He fights back. Your rapist doesn't know how. Under normal circumstances he may be the antithesis of your man, avoiding open retaliation against the object of his hatred. Unless you have other evidence, what you told me is hardly a basis for suspicion."

My "other evidence" boiled down to Carson having been first on the scene five out of eight times. I couldn't get that damning statistic out of my mind.

I couldn't get the case out of my mind.

At that, living with it was better than thinking of Martha. Martha's

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picture was still on my bureau, a blob of dimly reflected night light across from the bed.

I tried to visualize my reactions were Martha to be attacked. Couldn't. For five weeks my feelings about her had been frozen. Even when she phoned me from Reno two nights earlier, and I heard mockery in her huskily whispered, "Miss me, Bob?"

I couldn't say, because I didn't know.

I had asked, "What do you want?" noting that my voice was dry and incurious. To her it was a fuse.

"Not *you!*"

I had broken the connection, only for the long distance operator to ring a few moments later, bringing me Martha's apologetic: "I'm sorry, Bob. I guess I'm still raw inside. What I want —"

Her tan riding habit. I had sent it the following morning and promptly forgot her again. But now, weighing my attitude, I seemed to be neither glad nor sorry she was getting the divorce. It even took effort to think of her now.

I finally drifted into a troubled sleep . . .

"Same pattern." Inspector Quinn, of Homicide, shrugged. "He caught 'em neckin' on a bench near the bushes where you found the kid. She finally admitted that much. Her talk of being abducted on upper Broadway was baloney. He must have sneaked up on 'em from behind. She knows nothin' except 'a black thing' hit her head and knocked her cold."

"A black thing?"

"Her words," Quinn smiled wryly. A leather-faced, old-school cop, he did not smile often. "We picked a fleck of black enamel from her hair. The lab says it's off metal."

"How about the boy?"

"Strangled from behind by big, strong hands. Broke the kid's neck."

"Anything else?"

"That shower spoiled any other traces." Quinn scowled, which more became him. "Think that's why he picks cloudy nights?"

"Doctor Rosen thinks it's a fetish because the pattern is always the same. The rapist is exacting a vicarious vengeance against a blonde he associates with a cloudy night. A lover spurned by a blonde, or a two-timed husband, or the son of a dominating blonde mother. His victims are proxies."

"And doxies." Quinn allowed himself a second tight smile, establishing a sort of record. "This one's a blonde wildcat. You want her?"

"Yes."

"Seen her husband?"

I had; a graying man with a big belly. She had been his secretary in a textile converting firm. The dead boy had been a shipping clerk there. The husband intended to get a New York divorce on the grounds of adultery.

"I saw him," I nodded.

"Old enough to have known better," Quinn growled, rising. "If he divorces her she says she'll sue the Department. I'll have her sent in."

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Carson had been right in one respect. She entered my office as if it were a burlesque runway, with a slow, hip-swaying stride. Sans dirt and freshly groomed, she was not pretty but beautiful, as a cat can be beautiful. Her violet eyes were large and tilted. Her cheeks tapered below high bones to lips that were full and soft, as if poised to kiss. She had platinum hair, piled high.

"Please be seated, Mrs. Jackson. I'm Captain Ryan."

She occupied the chair warily, her eyes and shoulders tense. She wore an aquatone dress of woollen material. Her only jewelry was a heart-shaped locket suspended by a slender golden chain from her neck. Her proportions, as Carlson had observed, were startling, but not so startling as the fury in her eyes when mine finally got back to them.

"And they hand out parking tickets!" she stormed in a low, intense voice. I was puzzled.

"Ma'am?"

"For what's on your mind, you ought to get ten years!"

I shuffled reports on my desk stupidly. When I looked up again her fury had given way to curiosity.

"I never thought I'd live to see a blushing cop!"

"Sorry," I murmured.

"A gentleman, too. Didn't I see you last night?"

"In the park, Mrs. Jackson. Now I'm concerned with the possibility that this attacker didn't happen on you accidentally; that he had seen you before and followed you. Possibly where you live, or worked, or shop, or wherever you spend your time. A stranger you may have noticed watching you the past few days. Or someone you know. For instance, a man whose advances you may have repulsed."

A smile chased the last sign of wariness from her face. "You talk like a book."

"My cross, Mrs. Jackson. Now, if you will think —"

"Riffle a phone book," she drawled, a disturbingly familiar expression in her eyes, "and make with a pin."

"Ma'am?"

She shrugged. "Something about me. It brings you running."

"Me?"

"Men. I have to keep brushing you off. Not you, personally. You're not a wolf. Maybe you don't have to be with those shoulders. But you asked me who I might have — repulsed?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jackson."

"That's it. In restaurants, theaters, night clubs, on the street — anywhere I go I keep brushing them off like flies. All the time. All over town. That's why I said if you want a list of repulses, riffle a phone book and make with a pin."

She took a cigarette from her aquatone bag. I flicked my lighter and leaned across the desk. She tried to reach my face with a smoke streamer. It hovered between us.

"How about men you know?" I asked tiredly. My headache was returning.

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"Jimmy was all." Her tone softened. "The poor kid."

I let the obituary hang, fingered reports, then asked my next question without looking up.

"I'm grasping for straws, Mrs. Jackson. I know you were knocked unconscious before you could see the man. But there are degrees of unconsciousness, even a twilight zone where impressions are recalled later, much like memories of a dream —"

She remained silent. I stared at the reports, waiting. Her silence continued. I raised my eyes, knowing she was waiting for that. In hers was that same disturbing glint. I recognized it now. Like Martha's eyes in the hospital. Almost mockery. But her voice was thoughtful:

"Yes. Something I remembered when I got up this morning. Like you said. I wasn't sure I'd dreamed it or what. A man whispering the same thing over and over again."

"What thing?"

She kept her eyes on mine and repeated a gutter epithet half a dozen times, concluding, "Like that. You're the blushingest man I ever saw."

"Could you recognize that whisper if you heard it again?" I asked thickly.

"Maybe."

"We rounded up eight suspects this morning. There's no point your confronting them, since you didn't see your assailant. But we could bring them behind you one at a time and have them whisper — what he whispered."

She squashed her cigarette in my desk tray, leaving the crimson-smeared tip erect. "Tomorrow?" she frowned. "I'm too jumpy now. What with old Jackson screaming for a divorce — and what happened last night. It left me sort of —" She shrugged, keeping her gaze intent on mine. "What comes between 'Captain' and 'Ryan'?"

"Robert."

"I'll call you Bob. Skip the Mrs. Jackson. When his shysters finish, I'll be Miss Holden again. Sally. I keep a little two-room apartment at 483 West 84th Street under that name. Sally Holden. Apartment 3A. It's all the home I've got now. If I remember anything else about last night — well, you might drop in. If you get any redder, your face will explode."

I couldn't have driven a word through my lips with a mallet.

She came to her feet and smoothed her dress with a slow caress, her eyes intent on mine. Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Be seeing you, Bob?"

I could no more have moved or spoken as she left my office had I been bound to my chair and gagged.

Even less, after the remainder of that office day had blurred past, could I keep my feet from their appointed round.

"That's *all* of it!" Sally wailed from across the room. "I don't remember anything else until that plainclothes cop shook me awake. Bob, is this why you came up here?"

I sat on the divan in the living

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room-kitchenette of her small apartment feeling my face flame. She eyed me in half-amused exasperation, then came over to sit by my side and put her hand gently on mine.

"Look, Bob. I'm glad you came, because I'd have flipped without anyone to talk to. But can't we skip the third degree and talk about something else for a while? Us, for instance?"

"I'm too much of a cop," I began, but I found her lips poised an inch from mine. She eliminated the inch. I became less of a cop. She drew back, smiling.

"That didn't hurt, did it?"

I grinned and fingered her golden locket. I flicked it open. Inside: *Sally and Myron forever.*

"Who's Myron?"

"Was. The kid next door. We were going to elope. He eloped with a mortar shell in Korea instead. So I married old Lardbelly. Then Jimmy came along, looking so much like Myron it hurt. That's my true confession. What's yours?"

"My wife's been in Reno five weeks."

"Who'd she catch you with?"

"A truck caught her. A night she was supposed to be in Mt. Vernon with her mother. She was on the front seat of a Ford sedan parked on a Bronx side street when the truck skidded into it. They had to cut her out of the wreck with torches. She was unconscious. The driver was dead."

"Your best friend, natch."

"A stranger."

"And you let her go to Reno?"

"It's cleaner that way."

"She'll sock you for alimony. That's what Lardbelly's scared of, why he wants a New York divorce."

"No alimony. She signed an agreement."

"What's she like?"

"A long-legged blonde like you. We met at a church dance."

"She nice?"

"No."

"Because she played around?"

"Yes."

"Am I nice?"

"Yes."

"Make sense."

"You're honest. She pretended to a virtue she didn't have."

The inch between our lips disappeared again, spurting my blood pressure, unhardening my arteries, turning the hair at my temples from gray to black again.

She drew back with a breathless laugh. "Just thought of something funny. I'm practically attacking the cop who's chasing the animal who attacked me. Like a merry-go-round—"

My headache returned like the blow of a fist. I got to my feet and strode to the window and stared down blindly at 84th Street.

"What is it, Bob?" she whispered, coming up behind me. "I put my foot in my mouth?"

I shook my head at her dim reflection in the glass. "My fault, Sally. I just hadn't thought of it like that. I wanted your company so desperately —"

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"Wanted?"

"Still do." I forced a smile through my frown in the glass. "We'll pick it up tomorrow, or the day after. I'm too much of a cop; I take my job too seriously, they tell me. I used to work myself sick on Homicide. This is more of the same. As if it's a contest to the death between the man who attacked you and myself. The mere thought of him sickens me."

She came between me and the window, standing so close I could smell her blondeness, like the scent of an open field.

"Goodbye, Bob?"

"Of course not! Just good night."

Her long scarlet-tipped fingers smoothed the graying hair at my temples.

"You're a funny guy, Bob. You're built like a dock walloper, got the face of a priest. And inside you're like a high school kid on his first date. I'm nuts about you."

"I'm a funny guy."

"You better see me again."

"Yes."

"You don't, I'll come down to Center Street and pick up from here right in your own office. You hear me, you big baboon?"

The phone awakened me at one in the morning. For a few moments I lay in bed, confused. The night sky outside my window was flecked with stars. In four weeks these had been my first hours of freedom from nightmares about the case. I owed that to Sally.

But a starlit sky made the pattern wrong. I groped for the phone, heard a long-distance operator, and felt myself freeze.

Martha came on with her little girl's voice: "Bob, I'm broke."

"I gave you $4,000. All I had. You've only been there five weeks."

"I know, Bob. I've been bad. I was winning at first. I'd planned to send you back the $4,000. But then the system went kaput."

I could hear music and voices in the background. And an urgent whisper. As if someone was prompting her.

My headache returned. I asked, "What system?"

"Well, this cowboy I met told me —"

Percentage — the god of every ex-gambling Bowery stiff. A law-of-averages system. As if each deck of cards and each roulette wheel had built into it the parabolic law of chance.

"It worked for five weeks, Bob. But then —"

The law of averages was repealed until she went broke.

"I'll scrape up 500 in the morning, Martha. That should see you through. If it doesn't, and you fail to go through with the divorce, I'll file for one here in New York."

I broke the connection before she could reply. My headache was raging. I couldn't return to sleep. I lit a reading lamp, got into my big chair with duplicates of the case reports, and tried to fathom a new lead from the Whisperer's pattern of attack.

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But my thoughts kept drifting back to the Saturday night Sergeant Murphy had phoned me about Martha.

She had been extricated from the wreck by the time I got there. I stood in the drizzle looking through the jagged hole in the Ford's jammed door at the corpse of the man still inside. The steering shaft had impaled him. A blond man in a gray suit. A stranger. A total stranger.

It was with her little girl's voice that she had spoken to me from her hospital bed. "Can't I make it up to you some way, Bob?"

"Yes," I had told her, surprised that I felt no emotion looking down at her, no emotion at all. "Get a Reno divorce. No alimony. I'll send your things. You're not to set foot in my apartment again."

And then mockery had filled her eyes and voice. "Why, you prissy old maid! Do you think he was the *first?* You think any red-blooded woman would stay satisfied, married to a dull, inhibited —"

The rest followed me down the long corridor in hoarse screams.

I walked into the night. And kept walking through endless drizzle. Until I found myself awakening in my own bed, trembling.

Plainclothesman Carson relished the assignment. I had him stand in the interrogation room's doorway and several times whisper the gutter epithet, ostensibly to show the suspects how.

Eight of them. Netted around Riverside Drive between the time of Sally's attack and dawn. Three park-bench sleepers, four strollers who claimed to be insomniacs, and a huge dock worker whose frenzied incoherence earmarked him for observation in Bellevue when the experiment was over.

Sally's back was to the doorway as the eight men, following Carson's example, appeared behind her and whispered the epithet. When it was over, Sally could only shift a wry smile from Inspector Quinn to me and say, "I couldn't even tell one from another. It's impossible."

"It is," Quinn agreed. "Sorry to have taken up your time, Mrs. Jackson."

Her eyes questioned mine as Carson began to escort her out. I watched the tremor in his big, freckled hand reaching for her arm, then turned to find Inspector Quinn regarding me with amusement. When the door closed behind them, he murmured, "What you got on Carson?"

"Carson?"

Quinn snorted. "He could have briefed 'em downstairs. You had her test his voice along with the others. Why?"

"He was first on the scene five times."

"What else?"

"He's powerful, over six feet, and sex-obsessed."

"I thought this fiend hates women."

"One woman. Others, only when they remind him of her. And only

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during spells. Assuming he's schizophrenic."

"What else?"

"Carson is smothered under women at home. His mother and two sisters are all big, loud, domineering blondes."

"What else?"

"I keep going back to his being first on the scene five times. In three different parks. We switch assignments nightly so prowlers won't get used to our men. The odds against one officer running into five out of eight victims under such conditions are fantastic."

"Been tailin' him?"

"We lost him just before Sally — Mrs. Jackson — was attacked. Yesterday I borrowed three more rookies from Brooklyn, making four in all. They're to lie in wait wherever his patrol will be the next cloudy night."

"Tonight," Quinn grunted. "Accordin' to the papers."

"Tonight, then. And every cloudy night from now on. Until we're sure one way or the other."

We spent the rest of the afternoon checking my dragnet.

My men had rounded up all former sex offenders, checked psycho dischargees from hospitals, prisons, the armed services. No lead had been found.

I had used maps in an effort to find a geographical pattern. But the Whisperer struck at random. His victims and their boy friends came from widely separated parts of the city. The only pattern we had was that he struck from behind on cloudy or drizzly nights — and concentrated on blondes.

We checked my decoy set-up: blonde policewomen paired with plainclothesmen and sent into the parks on cloudy nights. And my pattern of patrols varied from night to night, men and routes being shifted nightly.

We reread the eight attack reports and, in the end, could do little more than stare at each other.

"One thing," Quinn finally growled. "It's almost as if this guy anticipates you. He always attacks when the nearest patrol is moving away from the scene."

"I keep thinking of Carson."

"Or dumb luck." Quinn shrugged. "Ten times this many patrols couldn't locate all the neckers in all the parks on any one night."

We left it at that.

The moisture-weighted atmosphere, when I finally left my office, depressed me. I walked out of an upper Broadway restaurant unable to recall what I had eaten. Too unsettled to return home, I entered a movie house — and emerged fifteen minutes later with a headache and no idea of what the picture was supposed to be about.

Back in the apartment the phone was ringing.

Sally.

"You looked so grim down at headquarters, darling."

"It's a grim place."

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She laughed. "Well, I've got the cure for that. Scotch, rye, and bourbon. And if that doesn't wear down your resistance, I'll use a blackjack. Coming soon?"

"Not this evening, Sally. A cloudy sky is forecast."

"Oh? . . . *oh!*" A pause for reflection. Then: "Kit wants to date me. Shall I?"

"Who?"

"Carson. He says all his friends call him Kit. Didn't you know that?"

"I know him as Martin Henry Carson. Tonight?"

"With Stoneface keeping him up all day to breathe nasty language down my neck?" Her laughter was low and delicious. "I shouldn't rat on him, but Stoneface is what they call you, darling. Anyhow, he has to be at work midnight, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Will you date him?"

"I'm asking you."

"I can't decide, Sally. On the one hand I'd like your reactions to the man when his guard is down; on the other, you may run into trouble."

"What could happen that didn't?"

"The same would be terrible enough. I'd have men covering you. But a cornered man may act desperately. The decision must be yours."

"All right. He's off tomorrow. He asked me to go dancing. I will."

"Good."

"*Good?* Aren't you jealous?"

I didn't know. Probably not. Sally as an instrument for trapping Carson seemed more desirable at the moment than Sally as a substitute for Martha.

The sense of these musings must have reached her, because I heard her try to slam the connection, miss, mutter "*Damn!*" and try again. This time she succeeded.

My phone rang immediately. Long distance. Martha. Screaming: "Bob? I've been haunting the telegraph office all day! They must think I'm crazy. You promised —"

I had forgotten about the $500.

"I'm sorry, Martha. Tomorrow morning —"

"What will I do *now?* You go and wire it immediately! Bob? Bob, do you hear me —?"

They could hear her in Canarsie. I couldn't get hold of $500 at this hour. In the morning I would negotiate a bank loan. I didn't tell her that. I told her nothing. My head throbbed. I broke the connection and went to the bathroom for aspirins.

When the pain subsided I took her photo off the bureau and studied her pale blonde, aristocratic face. I thought of her well-bred manner, her charm, her tenderness.

A year and a half of that. No violent passions had disturbed our marriage. It had seemed to burn along with a quiet, small flame.

Too quiet, too small, apparently, for her.

So a truck skidded out of control on wet pavement and they dragged her from the embrace of a corpse . . .

I flung her picture at the radiator and watched its frame spring open. Splinters of glass flew. I wrenched my gaze from her delicate smile on the

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floor up to the window. Low, black clouds were beginning to swarm into the night sky.

My phone was ringing. I had been dozing in the big chair. Lieutenant Gold was on the line.

"An attack, Captain. Fifteen-year-old girl on East River Drive."

My watch said 11:30. The pattern was all wrong. Lieutenant Gold's voice went on:

"We got three of 'em."

"*Three?*"

"Teen-agers. Call themselves the Arrows. Nine in all. Want our men to round up the other six?"

Outside my window the night was almost pitch-black.

"No, Lieutenant. Let the local precinct handle it. Keep all our men in the parks."

"Yessir."

I stood at my living-room window looking down on West End Avenue. Some pedestrians carried umbrellas under their arms. It wasn't raining, just threatening.

I thought of sleep, decided I couldn't. And thought of Sally. I kept thinking of Sally. Her boldness had both stimulated and repelled me. But the gentleness below her brassy surface had affected me deeply. I dialed her number, then listened to her bell ring on and off a full minute, unanswered.

Carson?

Sergeant Murphy's voice was hoarse in the receiver. He had just checked in. Morning hoarseness fifteen minutes to midnight. He said, "I'll see, Captain." I listened to headquarters noises, then: "Carson didn't check in yet."

"Let me know when he does."

"Right."

It took a few minutes to locate Carson's home number. Before I could dial it, mine rang again. Sergeant Murphy again:

"Carson just checked in. Want to talk to him?"

"No, Sergeant."

My hand left a wet trace on the receiver. So she wasn't with Carson. Out somewhere. Possibly at a movie, or a friend's house, or with another man. My fault. She *had* invited me. I found my image grinning ruefully back at me from the bathroom mirror as I swallowed another pair of aspirins.

My headache eased a little and I crawled into bed and tried to sleep, and did.

And found Sally.

In my doorway. She wore a transparent raincoat over her aquatone dress, a transparent hood over her platinum halo. She was smiling.

Not at me. At someone behind me.

Turning, I saw only my living room.

Turning back, the doorway was empty. I stepped through it and saw Sally moving down the corridor slowly, her skirt swishing from side to side in languorous counterpoint to the click of her high heels.

I ran down the corridor, trying to call her back. But something had happened to my voice. I ran into the elevator after her.

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As it descended she tilted her lips to me, her eyes sparkling. I couldn't respond. I wanted to. My lips approached hers eagerly. At the point of contact hers vanished.

Sally vanished.

I seemed enmeshed in fog. I groped through it and emerged into a cloud-darkened night scene. Vaguely familiar. Before me curved an ascending sidewalk flanked by a low stone fence to my left and empty benches to the right. About a hundred yards ahead, walking slowly away from me, was Sally.

Occasional headlights, coming and going, swam past to my right.

Riverside Drive.

I must have awakened partially then, because I recall becoming aware of my heart hammering against my ribs like a fist. I remember trying to open my eyes, being unable to, struggling desperately to open them — and finally succeeding. I glimpsed a kaleidoscope of shadows. Then back to the scene on Riverside Drive.

Sally was gone. I stared around at the rows of benches, the motionless trees, the empty sidewalk. I ran to the low wall and peered over it. In the shadows below I saw Sally picking herself off the grass.

I vaulted the wall and floated gently down. Too gently. Too slowly. By the time I landed Sally was moving away again, keeping to tree shadows, avoiding lawns and park walks where occasional lamps blurred the darkness.

Fear gripped me as I recognized the direction she was taking. But my feet had become rooted. I stared about wildly, seeking help, and saw nothing but empty benches along the paths, empty lawns spreading away into the night. I tried to remember which patrol I had assigned to this area. I couldn't remember.

Dreaming. I knew I was dreaming. I had a vague impulse to force myself awake, use my phone, get help. I couldn't. I just couldn't.

And then I faced Sally again. Near the KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign. She was smiling, unbuckling her raincoat. Deliberately she bunched it up, then flared it like a curtain between us. When it descended she was gone.

The boy was there! Tongue and eyes protruding. Purple welts on his neck. The same boy — Jimmy. Standing. Facing me with bulging, dead eyes. The same boy! The same boy!

My head was one roaring scream. I seized it. I pounded it with my fists. I rolled with the agony, sobbed in relief when it began to pass.

My eyes opened and I stared at Sally. Not the boy. Sally was standing there. I stared at her golden locket. *Sally and Myron forever.*

I stared at Sally. She stared back as if I were a stranger. Her lips were moving but I heard no words. Her eyes were widening. They were widening, widening.

Blotted by shadow.

I could hear her through it. Screaming. She was screaming.

I could stand no more. I heard myself moan, and opened my eyes.

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I was in my own bed, bathed in sweat from head to toe. The phone was ringing steadily on my night table. My head ached, my tongue felt thick and fuzzy. The phone shrilled with the same urgent regularity of Sally's screams. My hand trembled reaching for it.

Sergeant Murphy, his voice unsteady:

"It's the worst yet, Captain. I'm sending Jaffe around with the car."

My stomach was a knot. I felt cold; covered with sweat, but cold. I could barely croak into the instrument: "Where?"

"Same place. Can you beat it!"

"*Where?*"

"Riverside Park. The exact same place. Not only that, Captain, but —"

Every nerve in my body jumped. "Dammit, Sergeant! But what?"

"*The same girl!*"

I sat staring at the dead instrument in my hand. It was fantastic, frightening. How, in my dream, had I known it was Sally? How had I known it was the same place? If, when I got there, I learned she had actually worn a transparent raincoat, how could that be explained? My head throbbed with unanswerable questions.

My body ached with fatigue. As if I had not been asleep from midnight to dawn, but had actually been out in the night running after Sally.

Even my damp clothes on the floor added to the illusion. Drizzle blowing in through my open window, of course.

I began to dress, thinking of Martha. Later I would borrow the $500 and wire it to her and that would finish it.

I was getting into my raincoat when Patrolman Jaffe rang the downstairs bell.

This time Sally was not defiant. No need for an intern to wheedle her into an ambulance. She did not scream at Sergeant Murphy or concoct a false story of being abducted on upper Broadway.

I stopped the moving litter, then raised an edge of the canvas and looked at the blood splotch that had been Sally's forehead, but not seeing it; seeing, instead, the edge of the transparent raincoat they had folded over her.

The litter moved on and into the waiting morgue van. I turned. Inspector Quinn was gripping my arm. His face was ashen in the dawn light.

"Filthy, isn't it, Bob? The same girl. The same place —"

"The same man?"

Incredulity distorted his face. "If it was, she knew him. She knew him but wasn't afraid of him. She knew him, but not that he was the guy who'd attacked her before. At least that narrows the field."

I beckoned to Sergeant Murphy. Quinn waved him back.

"Carson?"

I nodded.

"No dice. You had him in Morningside Park all night. I checked him first thing. Carson was under observation every minute of his tour. He still

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is. You got to know her, Bob. Who might have been able to get that close to her?"

"Husband?"

"Checked him also."

"She said, 'Riffle a phone book and make with a pin.' "

"Oh, great!"

"I was planning to bait her with Carson."

"She get under your skin?"

"Deep."

Deeper than I had suspected. I could hear her whispering: *You're a funny guy, Bob. You're built like a dock walloper, got the face of a priest. And inside you're like a high school kid on his first date. I'm nuts about you.*

But she went to the park with a two-legged beast. She sought romance. New thrills. New sensations. Like getting her forehead smashed.

"Bob," Inspector Quinn shook my arm, "you're dead on your feet. Have Jaffe take you home. I'll cover for you downtown. Tomorrow we'll go over the whole picture once more."

I did not realize I had submitted to his suggestion until my apartment door closed behind me. In the foyer I slowly got out of my raincoat. It slipped to the floor. As I picked it up, my flash rolled from a pocket — and something else.

I frowned down at it a long while before stooping and raising it by a broken end of slender golden chain. Sally's locket. *Sally and Myron forever.* Dirt-caked. I couldn't remember picking it up at the scene, but I must have. How else could it have got into my pocket? I would turn it in tomorrow.

My flash must have dropped from my pocket at the scene also. It was caked with drying reddish grime. I couldn't recall dropping it, couldn't remember how bits of its enamel had come to be chipped off.

I spent most of the day at my desk writing this record of everything that has happened since I first laid eyes on Sally. I have included so many personal details — including my nightmare — because seemingly unrelated memories are often linked.

And something seems to have emerged. I sense it.

But my brain is dull. I cannot find it. Something, I feel, having to do with the attacker's pattern.

Not Carson. That much is certain now. Happening on the scene five out of eight times *was* a coincidence.

All I know of the man I'm looking for is that he is big, powerful; that he was injured by some blonde on a cloudy night; and that, either by luck or plan, he attacks when the nearest patrol is moving away.

And something else. I sense that important knowledge of him and his pattern is hidden somewhere in this account. But the words blur. My brain is dull, fogged. I am very tired now. Almost tired enough to sleep.

I will show this to Inspector Quinn in the morning. Maybe he can discover what I can only sense. Something that may lead us to the attacker.

I hope so. I fervently hope so.

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THE GLAMOROUS OPENING

by Q. PATRICK

LIEUTENANT TIMOTHY TRANT OF THE New York Homicide Bureau sat, somewhat subdued, in his orchestra seat at the Macready Theater, waiting for the curtain to rise on young Larry Race's first Broadway offering. At his side, blonde and resplendent, Dodo Mulligan chattered, brandished her rolled program at entering celebrities, and managed to look even more celebrated herself. Idly Trant marveled that the glamorous Dodo should have chosen for her escort anyone as unchic as himself. But there again, perhaps being seen with him was the height of chic in reverse: EX-WIFE OF FAMOUS RADIO COMMENTATOR FIRST-NITING WITH NEW YORK POLICE DETECTIVE.

"Darling . . . divine . . . ravishing".

Dodo Mulligan's flow of words overwhelmed him as she gesticulated with smooth white hands on one of which gleamed a huge emerald-encrusted ring. At dinner she had told him it had just been given to her by one of her admirers.

"It's Russian, doll. Belonged to a divine Czar or something. So amusing, don't you think?"

Trant thought how satisfactory being the ex-wife of Willie Mulligan must be. In the world of society and celebrity, Willie Mulligan with his daily radio chit-chat wielded a Czar's power. And, in spite of the recent divorce, most of his prestige still clung to Dodo, who was revered and courted on all sides. Why didn't anyone ever revere and court lieutenants in the Homicide Bureau?

The house lights were lowering when a tiny man swaddled in a muffler darted down the aisle with a dark, pretty girl. Dodo gave an excited gasp as the two latecomers squeezed into the row ahead.

"How thrilling! He's come after all."

"He?"

"Hunt Brickell — the play critic on the *Standard*. This afternoon he was stuffed with cold tablets. But I should have guessed he'd make it. Will there be murder tonight!"

Trant perked up at his favorite word. "Murder?"

"Bloody murder, darling." The curtain rose and angry shushes suppressed Dodo's voice to a hissing whisper. "That girl with him, his wife — she's fallen madly in love with Larry Race who wrote this play. And he's just as wild about her. Hunt's just found out. Larry's penniless. His whole future hangs on the play. A bad review from Hunt will slaughter it.

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And will Hunt's typewriter be dipped in venom! Darling, this is sensational."

From then on, although Trant enjoyed the play, part of his mind kept drifting to the little muffled man sitting in front of him thinking up vitriolic phrases with which to destroy the career of the man who threatened his happiness. This was a classic murder set-up, in which the wife or the playwright should obviously kill the critic before his lethal review could get into the papers. Trant, who doted on murder as much as Dodo doted on gossip, wished rather wistfully that Life would sometimes behave a little more like Fiction.

In the first intermission Dodo swept him into the foyer, tapping distinguished Hollywood elbows with her pocketbook, waggling her program at jeweled dowagers. Relentless as a beagle on a hot scent, she steered Trant to a corner where the little critic, still wearing his muffler and fastidiously clasping his program, stood with his pretty wife and a distraught young man with a mane of blond hair.

"Darlings!" Dodo swooped on them. "Lieutenant Trant — Mr. and Mrs. Brickell and our terribly clever author of tonight, Larry Race. Hunt, doll, you shouldn't have come with that dreadful cold. Right back to bed after your review! I insist. Give me a cigarette. I'm dying."

Fussily the little critic disentangled a cigarette case from the papers in his breast pocket. "Bed will have to wait." He tapped the pocket significantly. "Right after my review, I'm visiting my lawyer." An icy silence descended on the group. Hilda Brickell tried to fill it with an awkward compliment on Dodo's ring. Hunt Brickell peered at it, snapped: "Your last piece of loot, eh, Dodo?" and sneezed.

Instantly Hilda cried: "Hunt, you should take your cold tablets."

Larry Race, the victim propitiating his executioner, exclaimed: "I'll get you some orangeade, sir."

He hurried off and beat his way back to them with a paper cup, jostling against Dodo, and holding the drink respectfully while Hunt Brickell produced two tablets.

"I'm afraid it's pretty horrible stuff, sir."

"Who cares?" snapped Brickell. "I can't taste a thing anyway." He swallowed the tablets, drained the drink, and dropped the paper cup on the floor.

Dodo was whisked into another group and Trant was left with the triangle. The extreme nervous tension of the three, which would have embarrassed the average man, fascinated Trant. These were people on the very edge of violence. Anything might happen, he thought.

And then, suddenly, it did. As Dodo sailed back to them, Hunt Brickell gasped, dropped his program, and collapsed onto the floor. Mrs. Brickell screamed but, unexpectedly, shied away and clung to Larry Race. It was Dodo who, flinging down her program, plunged to the critic's side.

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With her pocketbook still clutched in her hand, she pulled off his muffler, calling: "Doctor! Quick!"

As Trant stooped at her side, the critic's body was twisted by a violent spasm and his mouth stretched into a dreadful, smirking grin.

Incredulously Trant thought: "Strychnine! Heavens above, they've done it! Strychnine in his orangeade!"

A doctor was brought. He and Larry Race, with Mrs. Brickell fluttering around them, carried the critic to the theater manager's office. Dodo gathered up her things, and Trant, automatically retrieving Brickell's scarf and program, followed. For fifteen harrowing minutes, the doctor did all he could, but by the time the second act was well under way with neither playwright nor critic to watch it, Hunt Brickell went into a second convulsion and died.

Trant had his murder. But perversely he felt almost guilty, as if his irresponsible reveries had somehow brought it about.

One of them? Or both of them? Trant continued his interrogation of the stricken Hilda Brickell and the gaunt, defiant Race. The body had been covered by a rug. Dodo, magnificently poised, stood by the door.

"You admit Mr. Brickell found out you were in love with his wife, Mr. Race, and that he also suspected her feeling about you?"

"Of course I do. There's no sense in denying it."

"And he was going to be very unpleasant about it?"

"He was. One way or another, it would have been a mess."

"Now, Mr. Race. You could easily have poisoned his drink when you brought it, and no one would have noticed."

"But he didn't!" blazed Mrs. Brickell. "Larry didn't!"

"He didn't?" Trant turned to her. "He had an excellent motive to kill your husband — before his damning review hit the press."

"Damning review!" Hilda Brickell tossed her dark head. "Do you imagine Hunt would ever let personal feelings interfere with his professional integrity? He was loving the play. Look at his program. He always wrote notes. Everyone knows that. Ask Dodo. See for yourself what he wrote."

Trant retrieved the program from beside the dead man's muffler and unrolled it. He inspected each page and then looked grimly at Mrs. Brickell. "I'm sorry. There are no notes here."

"No notes? But — but of course there are!"

Suddenly Trant felt the fizz of excitement which the unexpected always brought. The program in his hand was rolled. Unlike Dodo, Brickell had not been a program roller. He glanced at the virgin program thrusting up from behind Dodo's pocketbook.

"Dodo, when you dropped your things you must have switched programs with Brickell." He took the fresh program from her and opened it. Against the cast of characters he saw

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neatly jotted notes. *Enchanting . . . the spirit of youth reborn in the Theater . . .*

He smiled wryly at Mrs. Brickell. "I'm sorry. I did underestimate your husband's integrity." His eyes shifted to Dodo. "Smart. Picking a policeman for an escort, priming him ahead of time with other people's motives for murder. Very smart to switch programs, too. I suppose you'd guessed his notes would be favorable."

Dodo stared: "Darling —"

"The ring, of course." Firmly Trant removed it from her finger and fiddled until a pressed catch released the jeweled face to reveal a tiny compartment. "The divine Czar's poison ring. So amusing! And so handy for dropping strychnine into the orangeade. Particularly when Race was holding the drink right by you while Brickell fumbled for his tablets. And you knew Brickell's cold would keep him from noticing the bitter taste."

Dodo Mulligan's glare was ominous now. "But you're out of your mind. Why? *Why?*"

"I should have guessed that, too. Brickell was a literate guy. I wondered why he said '*your last piece of loot*' when grammatically he should have said '*latest.*' But of course he meant '*last,*' didn't he? He was going to make sure it was your last. When did he threaten to expose your looting activities? This afternoon, I suppose. No wonder you were in such a hurry to kill him."

Dodo Mulligan looked haughty as a challenged Empress. Trant's gamble had been terrific. Everything depended on proving a motive. Tautly he crossed to remove the blanket from the dead man.

"When Brickell mentioned his lawyer he tapped his pocket as if he had papers . . . I wonder . . . " His fingers slipped into the pocket. "No papers now. So you sneaked them into your pocketbook while you were loosening his muffler."

He swung to Willie Mulligan's ex-wife and snatched the pocketbook from her hand. Inside it, he found an unsealed envelope. He opened it and read out loud:

"Dear Mr. Mulligan:

"I feel I should warn you, as a reputable public figure, that I am going to report your ex-wife to the police. Although I am sure you have no idea of this, she has been using scandalous information, taken from your confidential files, for the purposes of blackmail. I first began to suspect her when I heard she had received a valuable ring from a certain celebrated actress who later confessed to me that your ex-wife had extorted it from her by threatening to expose a past indiscretion. Subsequently I have come across more of Dodo Mulligan's victims. In view of these discoveries, it is clearly my duty to . . ."

He broke off. "Yes, Mr. Brickell was a man of integrity. He was cautious, too. He held up mailing this letter until he could make sure from his lawyer that it didn't constitute slander. Too bad. If he hadn't been so cautious, he might still be alive."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Lillian King's "Try to Remember" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. It is an unusually perceptive story for a beginner, and a disturbing study of a nice clean young man who loved iris and was so refined about music — yes, a nice clean young man who made Mrs. Penleigh feel ten years younger.

The author was born and raised in Utah, but she has spent her adult life in Southern California. She has been writing seriously for the past six years or so, aiming primarily at the "slick" women's magazines. But while the letters of rejection became more and more encouraging, she did not achieve her first sale until EQMM accepted "Try to Remember." Wondering why, Lillian King came to the conclusion that being married and having a daughter two and a half years old (at the time "Try to Remember" was written), she had somehow managed to bring a greater depth of feeling to the theme of her first-accepted story than she had ever been able to do before. We think the author's analysis is perfect: there is no substitute for genuine depth of feeling — not in style or plot or anything else. And so we say with great confidence: Lillian King is on her way . . .

TRY TO REMEMBER

by LILLIAN KING

LITTLE MRS. PENLEIGH SAT BACK on the sofa, but that wasn't too comfortable, either. Her feet didn't touch the floor.

"Can't you remember? Please try." The gray, questioning eyes searched her till she squirmed.

She felt annoyed that these men had come clear out here from San Francisco to ask her questions about her trip. For goodness' sake, she had more to do at 11 o'clock in the morning than sit in the front room and answer a lot of questions! She wished Frank, her husband, were here. Frank always took care of things.

There were two men, although only one of them asked her the questions. The other man sat in her petit-point chair across the room, and she had a feeling he carried a gun.

"It's important," the talking man was saying. "Any little detail you might have forgotten."

As if she'd forget! She could remember every bit of what had happened on that trip. She fished a cigarette from the dish on the coffee

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table. The glass on the surface reproached her; she hadn't even had a chance to dust this morning.

She held the cigarette between her plump little fingers, so beautifully perfect. She felt grateful for their perfection, as if they alone embodied the true Grace Ralston Penleigh and the rest of her bulging body were some trespasser infringing on the property right that was her soul.

Mrs. Penleigh thought only vaguely of her soul. All the things you wanted to get close to were always so remote, so strange.

"I've got a wonderful memory," she said. "Ask anybody who knows me. They'll say —"

"Try, lady. Try to remember."

She lit the cigarette and blew the smoke out to curtain reality. She was back again traveling on The Daylight from San Francisco to Los Angeles. It had been an adventure. Adventure didn't come often after fifteen years of married life and they wanted to tear it apart and make it ugly, these two men out to investigate.

The way it had happened came back to her. She remembered the stranger had entered the train at the last possible moment. He had seemed rushed and a little off balance as the train began its preliminary jolts. He had held his ticket high to make out the seat number, so that Mrs. Penleigh didn't see his face then. He passed her as the train lurched forward.

He wore neat crepe-soled oxfords that looked as if they'd just come out of the box. When the two unscuffed shoes turned, she knew instinctively that he would be her seat companion.

"Foolish of me to go past when this is the only vacant place in the car," the stranger had said with a smile. "May I share your seat?"

"Of course." Mrs. Penleigh knew that embarrassed kind of smile. She had smiled back in understanding. "Were you in time to check your bags?" she had asked, noting that he didn't carry even a brief-case with him.

"No," he had said.

"You mean you have no luggage?" Mrs. Penleigh had turned with a perplexed look. She'd never dream of starting a trip without at least her overnight bag. "You can't be going far, then."

"To Los Angeles," he said, "and I can have a bag expressed to me." He laughed a little at her relief.

She had seen then that he wasn't — well, young. But he wasn't old, either. Mainly he seemed clean, as if he'd jumped right from a soapy shower into the train. Yes, and donned freshly pressed clothing in the jump.

A little thrill of anticipation ran down her spine. She had felt suddenly happy at the tailored lines of the smart new gray suit she was wearing.

"Yes," she nodded absently to the gray, questioning eyes before her now, "he was a nice clean young man."

The stranger had leaned back and

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tamped tobacco into a pipe that wasn't at all smelly, a pipe with such a clever curve to it — just the kind she'd always wanted Frank to get. If he had to smoke a pipe, that is. Funny how she remembered the pipe better than the stranger's face.

"My name is Penleigh," she had said, turning with another smile. "Mrs. Frank Penleigh." She waited a few seconds and when he said nothing she had added, "As long as we're going to make this trip down to Los Angeles together, we might as well know each other."

He introduced himself then. Roger Bledstow, or Bledstone, or Bledstung — something that bled. She had meant to ask him later, when it would come up naturally.

"You mean you aren't even sure of his name?" The talking man narrowed his eyes on her.

"No," she said, "but he worked for Farthing's. They have stores all over — Merced, Reedley, Burlingame —"

"What sort of work?"

The question was rude, interrupting her that way. She shrugged. "This was his vacation. But at the store no one knew where he was going. He was so original!"

"Listen, lady, you know anything about some postcards mailed to the store?"

"Oh, those cards," Mrs. Penleigh nodded. "Certainly. I mailed some for him on Wednesday. I'd promised him. So that they'd have a Pomona postmark, you see."

Mrs. Penleigh had told the stranger by then where she lived and he had mentioned having postcards come back from all over the United States. Back to the office for a joke . . . Alaska, Florida, New York, Boston, Pomona.

"Did you notice who they were addressed to?"

"It isn't polite to read other people's mail." Her eyebrows rose in reproof.

"But, Mrs. Penleigh —" Her questioner got up and paced across the room and back before continuing. "Didn't you notice anything different about this man? Your seat-companion?"

"Well," Mrs. Penleigh admitted, "riding along with him wasn't like riding with a — with a stranger. He was interesting — hardly like a man at all. Most men nudge your knee or your shoulder. On the train they get drowsy and they droop over — well, like the time the fellow crushed the orchid the girls at my bridge club gave me for a going-away. And there's always stories that if you laugh . . . You can't help but laugh, and then one thing leads to another. And I'm not that kind of woman." She paused so that the significance of this would not be lost on the two men in her living room.

"Yes," she continued, "he *was* different, now that you ask. He kept his elbows and his knees to himself. And we talked about nice things. Like about the iris —"

"What do you mean, about the iris?"

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Mr. Bledstone, or Bledstow, or whatever his name was, raised iris, Mrs. Penleigh explained patiently. He told her just how to plant it, turning the toe and bone meal, plenty of bone meal. Those prize varieties that cost so much multiply the same as common ordinary flags.

"So you're married, a home man with a garden?" she had asked archly.

"No, I live with my sister and her husband. They let me have a plot for my iris."

"Not married — a nice young man like you?" Mrs. Penleigh had turned in chiding amazement. Secretly she had felt she could be more friendly with a man who wasn't married.

A smile touched his clean-shaven face, a smile that seemed to say: Nothing is ever the way it should be in this old world.

"Mr. B —" (she would always think of him this way, for no opportunity came up to straighten out his name. Besides it was more romantic, like in a novel where a blank space followed an initial) "— Mr. B — had a neighbor who expected him to exchange choice iris with her when all she had was plain old flags. Quite a nerve. A dime-a-dozen type. But Mr. B — says yes, and next morning, right on his doorstep, is a box of her old flags. So he waits till Saturday and trims down the clumps into neat fan shapes —"

"But, lady, we aren't talking about plants," the man with the gray eyes said patiently. "Tell us about this man."

"Well, I'm trying to tell you! Don't you see? It wasn't till next spring, almost a whole year, that the neighbor found out he'd played a joke on her. It was the same plants. He just took and trimmed them off neat and returned her the same old plants."

Mrs. Penleigh waited, but they didn't laugh. Frank hadn't laughed, either. Of course, Frank didn't know a thing about iris and couldn't be expected to see the point.

"You say this fellow bought papers? Late editions?"

"Yes," she nodded, "at San Luis." In her mind's eye she could see the boy coming through the car with a batch of papers and the stranger buying all the late editions, though he'd gone through three San Francisco papers as soon as they pulled out. He didn't really read them. Well, headlines maybe. It had been more like searching. To see if something was there.

"Do you follow the stock market?" Mrs. Penleigh had asked conversationally when he began to spread the batch of papers in his lap.

He had turned the page without answering and she had repeated, "Do you follow the stock market? I understand it gets a hold on you just like gambling."

The stranger had turned to her with a scowl. Either she'd said something wrong, or he objected to her trying to be pleasant. With dignity she had risen.

"Excuse me." She had brushed

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past him to retire to the Ladies' Lounge. But the lounge had been crowded with primping women. She could scarcely find a spot to stand, let alone sit. She would be forced to return to her seat and the stranger. Maybe she'd been a little hasty and foolish. A nice clean type like him, and so interesting.

She had returned to see him sitting there with his legs crossed. He wore Argyle socks, bright yellow with tones of sage and hunter green worked in. It gave Mrs. Penleigh an indecent feeling to think that she could recall the crepe-soled shoes and the Argyle socks, but not his features. Like a man always looking at a woman's legs, when really *she* hadn't looked that way at all.

"What happened then, lady?"

"Well, of course we talked." Her voice came out high and irritable. She felt a quick impulse to slap the face with the questioning eyes. She'd been trying to tell every single thing.

Off and on all the way down they had talked. She had been careful to make no more irritating remarks. When she napped, they had taken up their conversation right from where they'd left off. What conversation? Well, for one thing they had talked about music. Ravel and a piece called "Daphnis and Chloe." She didn't really understand such music. Music like that disturbed her.

"Music should be soothing — something you can hum, don't you think?"

"Lady, I'm no musician. What I want to know is about this man."

"Well, I'm trying to tell you," she snapped. Just for that she wouldn't tell what happened next.

She remembered she had picked up a section of the paper from the side of the seat and glanced idly through it. She had begun to compare prices on food. Was meat higher in Los Angeles than in San Francisco? She liked to know things like that. She had turned to a page from which a small boxed item had been torn.

She had looked up, aware of something. The stranger's eyes were on her. Suddenly she had felt uncomfortable and put the paper down with a crackly noise and a laugh. "Not much news," she had said.

His look had lingered on her. As if he'd caught her looking at something she shouldn't. Like that time when she'd watched the man in the hotel room across the way.

A sort of shame filled Mrs. Penleigh and she sat mute, contemplating the rosy tints of her fingernails.

Clickety-clack . . . clickety-clack . . .

She had not been conscious of dozing off until the train gave a jolt and woke her up.

"What about that disturbance on the train?" The man in her petit-point chair spoke for the first time.

"Well, I'd fallen asleep. The train jogged and jerked me awake, and there he was with the little girl on the seat between us. A fat little girl with sticky fingers and grimy-looking legs."

"Go on," said the second man.

"Her dress," Mrs. Penleigh remem-

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bered, "was too short and her hair was a tangle of dark curls. They hadn't been brushed in a week, I'd guess."

"Be careful with your sticky fingers," Mrs. Penleigh had cried.

He had looked at her, surprised. She hadn't meant to sound so sharp. Then he had eased the little girl onto his lap and the child had started to giggle.

Mrs. Penleigh had felt a little ashamed of herself. "I'm sorry, but I'm not used to children. I've never had any."

At that the little girl had stuck her tongue out — a moist, blackish thing that had almost made Mrs. Penleigh gag until she realized the child had been eating licorice candy. Mrs. Penleigh had extended one hand, intending to pat the tangle of curls.

"You're fat and I don't like you," the little girl had shrilled.

Everyone in the car had heard. Mrs. Penleigh had taken a deep control-breath. It hurt her to repeat it, even now in her own living room to these two men.

"No, I can't say how old the child was. Just a dirty, impudent little girl."

"How did this man behave to the little girl?"

"Oh, ever so nice. Nicer than she deserved!"

"Tell us about it."

"After a moment I heard the stranger say, 'All-alone-little-girl, where did you come from?'

" 'Back there,' the child pointed.

" 'And where are you going?' he asked, in such a patient way.

" 'Home to daddy and Skeets,' she says, and when he asked if Skeets was her brother, she says, 'No, silly — Skeets is my turtle.'

"Real fresh, that child was, and then she began to squirm, but Mr. B — held her firmly, thank goodness. After a while the child fell asleep on his lap. He didn't even want to talk. Probably afraid I'd wake her up."

No, Mrs. Penleigh couldn't say how long the man held the child. Not very long, though. A tall girl, dark and gypsy-like, had come down the aisle. She wore big gold earrings, Mrs. Penleigh remembered, big dangling earrings.

"The minute my back was turned in the ladies' room my little girl ran away," she had said, looking at Mrs. Penleigh. "I hope she hasn't bothered you! You know how children . . ."

Her glance had shifted then to the sleeping child in the man's arms. He spoke very softly. "Just let her be. She's asleep. I'll carry her back later."

The mother had stared at him for a moment. Then she had swooped and grabbed her little girl, dirt and all, muttering, "Never mind. I've a notion to report you," or something like that.

The child had begun kicking and screaming, so that Mrs. Penleigh wasn't sure what the woman said. Mrs. Penleigh herself had spoken up. "Such rude, impossible people! Just goes to show you, trying to be nice."

Everybody in the car had turned.

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The stranger had looked miserable, his face flushing and his eyes darting about the car.

Kindness had prompted her to ask: "Would you join me? Along about this time of day I like to have a little pick-me-up. Usually it's a glass of sherry, but today I'm going to indulge. You look as if you could stand something after that — that . . ."

"Yes," he had said shortly, and he stepped down the aisle ahead of her.

He had ordered — yes, she'd always remember he ordered Rob Roys. Three of them, while she sipped her Tom Collins and wished she had a sugar lump to slip in so it would taste more like lemonade.

She wasn't sitting here on the sofa; she was there at the little table beside him, being swayed against him around the curves.

This Mr. B — had made her feel ten years younger. Not in a cheap, flirty way. More like a free, abandoned "what-does-it-matter" way.

When he asked, "Do you mind taking care of the check?", it had seemed only right and natural.

She had said, "My pleasure."

After thanking her for the drinks and making sure she was comfortable he had excused himself.

"And that," Mrs. Penleigh said, "was the last I saw of him."

"Your husband mentioned something when we phoned last night about a taxi. Remember that?"

"Well," she hesitated. Actually she was remembering how the stranger had looked, that moment in the shadows of the arched walk, before he had jumped into the taxi.

She had said, "Frank, there he is —"

"There who is? We've got to get your baggage, Grace, for heaven's sake!" That was Frank all over.

"That man — I'd like you to meet him." She had run toward the taxi. But he was busy giving the driver his address and they had driven away without noticing her.

"Didn't you hear the address he gave that taxi driver?" asked the second man.

"No," she lied. Why should she spoil that nice stranger's vacation?

"Try to remember!"

The detectives annoyed her. She'd told them all she remembered and they kept acting as if her memory wasn't good and mixing her up asking the same thing over.

She knew how to judge people. A nice, clean man like that who loved iris and so refined about music . . . Why, he'd never even touched her, never said one thing out of the way. And he'd been so kind to that little girl on the train. Maybe the mother had started this just to be spiteful. A woman who wore dangling earrings like that, and such a dirty little girl!

Mrs. Penleigh clenched her ten beautifully groomed fingers and pursed her mouth.

They'd get no more from her.

Mr. B — just couldn't have had anything to do with that little girl they had found dead under the culvert in San Francisco.

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Some of the world's finest poets have contributed stories to EQMM. In the past ten years we have brought you tales of crime, mystery, and detection by such famous poets as Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Christopher Morley, Lord Dunsany, Joyce Kilmer, G. K. Chesterton, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Mark Van Doren. Now we offer you an astonishing discovery — a murder story by (in the words of Mark Van Doren) "the most original and passionate American poet" — Walt Whitman!

Undoubtedly you will find this tale of violence a bit old-fashioned in the telling; but we can't help thinking that in these days of plain prose it will do your literary heart good to indulge in a few pages of fancy rhetoric.

We ask that you pay particular attention to the ending of the story — to the very last paragraph. Further comments when you have finished reading Walt Whitman's murder story . . .

ONE WICKED IMPULSE!

by WALT WHITMAN

That section of Nassau Street which runs into the great mart of New York brokers and stock-jobbers has for a long time been much occupied by practitioners of the law. Tolerably well-known amid this class some years since was Adam Covert, a middle-aged man of rather limited means, who, to tell the truth, gained more by trickery than he did in the legitimate and honorable exercise of his profession. He was a tall, bilious-faced widower; the father of two children; and had lately been seeking to better his fortunes by a rich marriage. But somehow or other his wooing did not seem to thrive well, and, with perhaps one exception, the lawyer's prospects in the matrimonial way were hopelessly gloomy.

Among the early clients of Mr. Covert had been a distant relative named Marsh, who, dying somewhat suddenly, left his son and daughter, and some little property, to the care of Covert, under a will drawn by that gentleman himself. At no time caught without his eyes open, the cunning lawyer, aided by much sad confusion in the emergency which had caused his services to be called for, and disguising his object under a cloud of technicalities, inserted provisions in the will giving him an almost arbitrary control over the property and over those for whom it was designed.

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This control was even made to extend beyond the time when the children would arrive at mature age. The son, Philip, a spirited and high-tempered fellow, had some time since passed that age. Esther, the girl, a plain, and somewhat devotional young woman, was in her nineteenth year.

Having such power over his wards, Covert did not scruple openly to use his advantage, in pressing his claims as a suitor for Esther's hand. Since the death of Marsh, the property he left, which had been in real estate, and was to be divided equally between the brother and sister, had risen to very considerable value; and Esther's share was to a man in Covert's situation a prize very well worth seeking. All this time, while really owning a respectable income, the young orphans often felt the want of the smallest sum of money — and Esther, on Philip's account, was more than once driven to various contrivances — the pawnshop, sales of her own little luxuries, and the like, to furnish him with means.

Though she had frequently shown her guardian unequivocal evidence of her aversion, Esther continued to suffer from his persecutions, until one day he proceeded farther and was more pressing than usual. She possessed some of her brother's mettlesome temper, and gave him an abrupt and most decided refusal. With dignity, she exposed the baseness of his conduct, and forbade him ever again mentioning marriage to her. He retorted bitterly, vaunted his hold on her and Philip, and swore an oath that unless she became his wife, they should both thenceforward become penniless. Losing his habitual self-control in his exasperation, he even added insults such as woman never receives from any one deserving the name of man, and at his own convenience left the house. That day, Philip returned to New York, after an absence of several weeks on the business of a mercantile house in whose employment he had lately engaged.

Toward the latter part of the same afternoon Mr. Covert was sitting in his office in Nassau Street, busily at work, when a knock at the door announced a visitor, and directly afterward young Marsh entered the room. His face exhibited a peculiar pallid appearance that did not strike Covert at all agreeably, and he called his clerk from an adjoining room, and gave him something to do at a desk nearby.

"I wish to see you alone, Mr. Covert, if convenient," said the newcomer.

"We can talk quite well enough where we are," answered the lawyer. "Indeed, I don't know that I have any leisure to talk at all, for just now I am very much pressed with business."

"But I *must* speak to you," rejoined Philip sternly, "at least I must say one thing, and that is, Mr. Covert, that you are a villain!"

"Insolent!" exclaimed the lawyer, rising behind the table and pointing to the door. "Do you see that, sir! Let one minute longer find you the other

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side, or your feet may reach the landing by quicker method. Begone, sir!"

Such a threat was the more harsh to Philip, for he had rather high-strung feelings of honor. He grew almost livid with suppressed agitation.

"I will see you again very soon," said he, in a low but distinct manner, his lips trembling as he spoke; and left the office.

The incidents of the rest of that pleasant summer day left little impression on the young man's mind. He roamed to and fro without any object or destination. Along South Street and by Whitehall, he watched with curious eyes the movements of the shipping, and the loading and unloading of cargoes; and listened to the merry heave-ho of the sailors and stevedores. There are some minds upon which great excitement produces the singular effect of uniting two utterly inconsistent faculties — a sort of cold apathy and a sharp sensitiveness to all that is going on at the same time. Philip's was one of this sort; he noticed the various differences in the apparel of a gang of wharf-laborers — turned over in his brain whether they received wages enough to keep them comfortable, and their families also — and if they had families or not, which he tried to tell by their looks. In such petty reflections the daylight passed away. And all the while the master wish of Philip's thoughts was a desire to see the lawyer Covert. For what purpose he himself was by no means clear.

Nightfall came at last. Still, however, the young man did not direct his steps homeward. He felt more calm, however, and entering an eating house, ordered something for his supper, which, when it was brought to him, he merely tasted, and strolled forth again. There was a kind of gnawing sensation of thirst within him yet, and as he passed a hotel, he bethought him that one little glass of spirits would perhaps be just the thing. He drank, and hour after hour wore away unconsciously; he drank not one glass, but three or four, and strong glasses they were to him, for he was habitually abstemious.

It had been a hot day and evening, and when Philip, at an advanced period of the night, emerged from the bar-room into the street, he found that a thunderstorm had just commenced. He resolutely walked on, however, although at every step it grew more and more blustering.

The rain now poured down a cataract; the shops were all shut; few of the street lamps were lighted; and there was little except the frequent flashes of lightning to show him his way. When about half the length of Chatham Street, which lay in the direction he had to take, the momentary fury of the tempest forced him to turn aside into a sort of shelter formed by the corners of the deep entrance to a pawnbroker's shop there. He had hardly drawn himself in as closely as possible, when the lightning revealed to him that the opposite corner of the nook was tenanted also.

"A sharp rain, this," said the other

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occupant, who simultaneously beheld Philip.

The voice sounded to the young man's ears a note which almost made him sober again. It was certainly the voice of Adam Covert. He made some commonplace reply, and waited for another flash of lightning to show him the stranger's face. It came, and he saw that his companion was indeed his guardian.

Philip Marsh had drunk deeply — (let us plead all that may be possible to you, stern moralist). Upon his mind came swarming, and he could not drive them away, thoughts of all those insults his sister had told him of, and the bitter words Covert had spoken to her; he reflected, too, on the injuries Esther as well as himself had received, and were still likely to receive, at the hands of that bold, bad man; how mean, selfish, and unprincipled was his character — what base and cruel advantages he had taken of many poor people, entangled in his power, and of how much wrong and suffering he had been the author, and might be again through future years. The very turmoil of the elements, the harsh roll of the thunder, the vindictive beating of the rain, and the fierce glare of the wild fluid that seemed to riot in the ferocity of the storm around him, kindled a strange sympathetic fury in the young man's mind. Heaven itself (so deranged were his imaginations) appeared to have provided a fitting scene and time for a deed of retribution, which to his disordered passion half wore the semblance of a divine justice. He remembered not the ready solution to be found in Covert's pressure of business, which had no doubt kept him later than usual; but fancied some mysterious intent in the ordaining that he should be there, and that they two should meet at that untimely hour. All this whirl of influence came over Philip with startling quickness at that horrid moment. He stepped to the side of his guardian.

"Ho!" said he, "have we met so soon, Mr. Covert? You traitor to my dead father — robber of his children! I fear to think on *what* I think now!"

The lawyer's natural effrontery did not desert him.

"Unless you'd like to spend a night in the watch-house, young gentleman," said he, after a short pause, "move on. Your father was a weak man, I remember; as for his son, his own wicked heart is his worst foe. I have never done wrong to either — that I can say, and swear it!"

"Insolent liar!" exclaimed Philip, his eye flashing out sparks of fire in the darkness.

Covert made no reply except a cool, contemptuous laugh, which stung the excited young man to double fury. He sprang upon the lawyer, and clutched him by the neckcloth.

"Take it, then!" he cried hoarsely, for his throat was impeded by the fiendish rage which in that black hour possessed him. "You are not fit to live!"

He dragged his guardian to the earth and fell crushingly upon him,

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choking the shriek the poor victim but just began to utter. Then, with monstrous imprecations, he twisted a tight knot around the gasping creature's neck, drew a clasp knife from his pocket, and touching the spring, the long sharp blade, too eager for its bloody work, flew open.

During the lull of the storm the last strength of the prostrate man burst forth into one short loud cry of agony. At the same instant the arm of the murderer thrust the blade, once, twice, thrice, deep in his enemy's bosom! Not a minute had passed since that fatal exasperating laugh — but the deed was done, and the instinctive thought which came at once to the guilty one was a thought of fear and escape.

In the unearthly pause which followed, Philip's eyes gave one long searching sweep in every direction, above and around him. *Above!* God of the all-seeing eye! What, and who was that figure there?

"Forbear! In Jehovah's name forbear!" cried a shrill, but clear and melodious voice.

It was as if some accusing spirit had come down to bear witness against the deed of blood. Leaning far out of an open window, appeared a white draperied shape, its face possessed of a wonderful youthful beauty. Long vivid glows of lightning gave Philip a full opportunity to see as clearly as though the sun had been shining at noonday. One hand of the figure was raised upward in a deprecating attitude, and his large bright black eyes bent down upon the scene below with an expression of horror and shrinking pain. Such heavenly looks, and the peculiar circumstance of the time, filled Philip's heart with awe.

"Oh, if it is not yet too late," spoke the youth again, "spare him. In God's voice, I command, 'Thou shalt do no murder!' "

The words rang like a knell in the ear of the terror-stricken and already remorseful Philip. Springing from the body, he gave a second glance up and down the walk, which was totally lonesome and deserted; then crossing into Reade Street, he made his fearful way in a half state of stupor, half-bewilderment, by the nearest avenues to his home.

When the corpse of the murdered lawyer was found in the morning, and the officers of justice commenced their inquiry, suspicion immediately fell upon Philip, and he was arrested. The most rigorous search, however, brought to light nothing at all implicating the young man, except his visit to Covert's office the evening before, and his angry language there. That was by no means enough to fix so heavy a charge upon him.

The second day afterward, the whole business came before the ordinary judicial tribunal, in order that Philip might either be committed for the crime, or discharged. The testimony of Mr. Covert's clerk stood alone. One of his employers, who, believing in his innocence, had deserted him not in this crisis, had provided him with the ablest criminal counsel

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in New York. The proof was declared entirely insufficient, and Philip was discharged.

The crowded courtroom made way for him as he came out; hundreds of curious looks fixed upon his features, and many a jibe passed upon him. But of all that arena of human faces, he saw only *one* — a sad, pale, black-eyed one, cowering in the center of the rest. He had seen that face twice before — the first time as a warning specter — the second time in prison, immediately after his arrest — now for the *last* time. This young stranger — the son of a scorned race — coming to the courtroom to perform an unhappy duty, with the intention of testifying to what he had seen, melted at the sight of Philip's bloodless cheek, and of his sister's convulsive sobs, and forbore witnessing against the murderer. Shall we applaud or condemn him? Let every reader answer the question for himself.

That afternoon Philip left New York. His friendly employer owned a small farm some miles up the Hudson, and until the excitement of the affair was over, he advised the young man to go thither. Philip thankfully accepted the proposal, made a few preparations, took a hurried leave of Esther, and by nightfall was settled in his new abode.

And how, think you, rested Philip Marsh that night? *Rested* indeed! O, if those who clamor so much for the halter and the scaffold to punish crime could have seen that sight, they might have learned a lesson then! Four days had elapsed since he that lay tossing upon the bed there had slumbered. Not the slightest intermission had come to his awakened and tensely strung sense during those frightful days.

Disturbed waking dreams came to him, as he thought what he might do to gain his lost peace. Far, far away would he go! The cold roll of the murdered man's eye, as it turned up its last glance into his face — the shrill exclamation of pain — all the unearthly vividness of the posture, motions, and looks of the dead — the warning voice from above — pursued him like tormenting furies, and were never absent from his mind, asleep or awake, that long weary night. Anything, any place, to escape such horrid companionship! He would travel inland — hire himself to do hard drudgery upon some farm — work incessantly through the wide summer days, and thus force nature to bestow oblivion upon his senses, at least a little while now and then. He would fly on, on, on, until amid different scenes and a new life the old memories were rubbed entirely out. He would fight bravely in himself for peace of mind. For peace he would labor and struggle — for peace he would pray!

At length after a feverish slumber of some 30 or 40 minutes, the unhappy youth, waking with a nervous start, raised himself in bed, and saw the blessed daylight beginning to dawn. He felt the sweat trickling down his naked breast; the sheet where he had lain was quite wet with it. Dragging

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himself wearily, he opened the window. Ah! that good morning air — how it refreshed him — how he leaned out and drank in the fragrance of the blossoms below, and almost for the first time in his life felt how beautifully indeed God had made the earth, and that there was wonderful sweetness in mere existence. And amidst the thousand mute mouths and eloquent eyes, which appeared as it were to look up and speak in every direction, he fancied so many invitations to come among them. Not without effort, for he was very weak, he dressed himself, and issued forth into the open air.

Clouds of pale gold and transparent crimson draperied the eastern sky, but the sun, whose face gladdened them into all that glory, was not yet above the horizon. It was a time and place of such rare, such Eden-like beauty! Philip paused at the summit of an upward slope, and gazed around him. Some few miles off he could see a gleam of the Hudson River, and above it a spur of those rugged cliffs scattered along its western shores. Nearer by were cultivated fields. The clover grew richly there, the young grain bent to the early breeze, and the air was filled with an intoxicating perfume. At his side was the large well-kept garden of his host, in which were many pretty flowers, grass plots, and a wide avenue of noble trees. As Philip gazed, the holy calming power of Nature — the invisible spirit of so much beauty and so much innocence, melted into his soul. The disturbed passions and the feverish conflict subsided. He even felt something like envied peace of mind — a sort of joy even in the presence of all the unmarred goodness. It was as fair to him, guilty though he had been, as to the purest of the pure. No accusing frowns showed in the face of the flowers, or in the green shrubs, or the branches of the trees. They, more forgiving than mankind, and distinguishing not between the children of darkness and the children of light — they at least treated him with gentleness. Was he, then a being so accursed? Involuntarily, he bent over a branch of red roses, and took them softly between his hands — those murderous, bloody hands! But the red roses neither withered nor smelled less fragrant. And as the young man kissed them, and dropped a tear upon them, it seemed to him that he had found pity and sympathy from Heaven itself.

Though against all the rules of story-writing, we continue our narrative of these mainly true incidents (for such they are) no further. Only to say that *the murderer* soon departed for a new field of action — that he is still living — and that this is but one of thousands of cases of unraveled, unpunished crime — left, not to the tribunals of man, but to a wider power and judgment.

(If you were "shocked" by the last paragraph; please continue reading.)

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One of the most interesting things about Walt Whitman's murder story is the relatively "unknown" fact that he wrote two endings for it. When the story first appeared in print (in the Democratic Review, July-August 1845) it was titled, "Revenge and Requital; A Tale of a Murderer Escaped," by Walter Whitman (then 26 years old). In this first version the ending was much longer and altogether different from the ending you have just read.

Let us synopsize the earlier ending. It begins: "After desolating the cities of the eastern world, the dreaded Cholera" struck New York City. Among the "small and sacred band" of good samaritans "who went out amid the diseased, the destitute, and the dying," one person was "more ardent and devoted than the rest . . . This messenger of health to many, and peace to all, this unwearied, unterrified angel of mercy and charity, was Philip Marsh." His motive, of course, was "to cancel, as far as he could, the great outrage he had committed on society by taking the life of one of its members."

One night Philip came upon a sick boy and discovered that his name was Adam Covert, whose father was killed a year ago by "a bad man." Philip learned that as a result of his murder of lawyer-Covert, the victim's "two children were left without any protector." When the cholera epidemic hit the city, the two orphan brothers were too poor to leave New York and find safety "in the neighboring country districts."

Philip became "the nurse, the friend, and the physician" of the sick boy. "Heaven blessed his exertions, and the boy recovered his health again . . . Philip's crowning act of recompense."

But once the "young patient was beyond danger," Philip himself succumbed. He "bequeathed his property to the boys whom he had made fatherless," and died.

Walt Whitman ends with this paragraph: "Some of my friends may, perhaps, think that he ought to have been hung at the time of the crime. I must be pardoned if I think differently."

The story — with some minor changes, a new ending, and a new title, "One Wicked Impulse!" — was first published in book form in Walt Whitman's SPECIMEN DAYS & COLLECT *(Philadelphia: Rees Welsh & Co., 1882–83). Now, why did Walt Whitman delete the earlier ending and substitute a single new paragraph of entirely different meaning? Nearly 40 years had passed since the first appearance of the story. In those 40 years did Walt Whitman come to regret the moralistic philosophy of his first*

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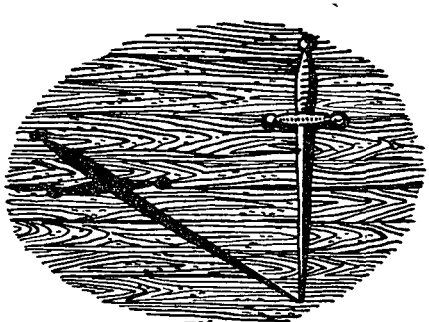
ending? — that even a murderer could atone for his crime. Surely the ending you read in the story — the second ending — is more cynical; in this later ending Walt Whitman permits the murderer to remain alive, apparently to prosper in "a new field of action," and to go unpunished until he is judged by a "wider power" than "the tribunals of man."

Yes, in the years between 1845 and 1883 Walt Whitman (to judge from the new ending he gave to his murder story) seems to have lost his earlier idealism. But that is not too surprising: surely enough happened in his life to cause such a change in heart and mind — the silence that first greeted his LEAVES OF GRASS, *the vicious attacks that followed the second edition, the veil that must have lifted from his eyes during the Civil War, the bitter enemies he continued to make, the total rejection he suffered at the hands of the common people whose voice and champion he tried so desperately to be . . .*

It is said that in his invalid years "the good gray poet" mellowed. Judging only by the new ending, published less than ten years before his death, would you agree that Walt Whitman mellowed with old age? We wonder . . .



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THE WAY I KILLED HIM

by OSCAR SCHISGALL

THE NIGHT OF THE MURDER I GOT into my dressing room early and started putting on make-up before 8 o'clock. That was why I didn't see Howard Reed when he came into the theater. The fact that he was drunk — so drunk that Lynn, his wife, had to support him when he walked in the stage door — wasn't surprising. It had happened before. It shouldn't have alarmed anybody. Pick up any history of the stage and you'll find there have been quite a few actors like Howard Reed who could give flawless performances when they were drunk.

There's no denying our play, *Witchcraft*, was a hit. We'd been running on Broadway for five months. At first most of us used to worry ourselves sick whenever Howard reeled into the theater half an hour before curtain time, smelling of Scotch or bourbon. Mark Seller, the producer, would hurry down from his office and tear at his gray hair. And then he'd yell to Charlie Dixon, Reed's understudy.

Larry Vaughn, who wrote the show and usually hung around the wings like a harried ghost, saw nothing but disaster in these moments. He'd groan, "Why didn't I stay in the navy, where men know *when* to get drunk?"

The only two who never seemed at all worried were Lynn Reed and Charlie Dixon.

Lynn would look at her husband with calm contempt. She was his leading lady as well as his wife. And Lynn would say in the deep, quiet voice that never hid her disdain, "He'll be all right. Just send out for some black coffee. He'll go on."

As for Charlie Dixon, the understudy, he probably saw every one of the star's binges as an opportunity.

"I'll be ready!" he'd say to Mark Seller, and it sounded like a prayer.

Invariably, however, Howard scuttled Charlie Dixon's hopes. Howard would growl at everybody backstage, "What the hell's the matter with you dopes? I won't ruin your show. Just help me dress."

Half an hour later he'd go on with one of those superbly smooth, villainous performances that made every audience hold its breath.

I was dusting the last touches of gray over my temples this Saturday night when Virginia Rocklin stepped into the dressing room.

"Don't get up, George," she said. "I'll stay just long enough to have a smoke and ask a favor."

Virginia did the publicity for Mark Seller's plays. She sat down now, crossed her beautiful long legs, and reached for one of my cigarettes. As she lit it she glanced over at me.

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"We ought to get your picture taken in that Japanese kimono," she said. It might make the Sunday papers. 'George Wyatt wearing the souvenir he brought home from the occupation of Japan.'"

"Terrific," I said. "The publicity stunt of the year."

She shook back the blonde hair that hung to her shoulders and settled down more comfortably. "Come to think of it, I didn't do so badly by you in last Sunday's *Trib*. You had a by-line. And a wonderful headline."

"'I Commit Murder Eight Times a Week,'" I quoted.

She had ghost-written the piece. It hung on the fact that six evenings and two matinees every week I shot Howard Reed to death in the third-act climax of *Witchcraft*. I shot him as he sat at his desk; then I crossed the stage to the telephone, called for the police to come and get me, and stood grimly waiting as the curtain came down.

Twice during the play's run, however, something had gone wrong with the mechanism of the .22 we used. There was no shot; just a click. The first time it happened, I squeezed the trigger again and again, with panic rising in me. And still no shot.

Reed saved the situation. Lunging around the desk to grapple with me, he seized the gun, pulled me into a violent wrestling bout. And as we fought he whispered, "Swing against the desk! Pick up the paper knife and *stab* me!" So I did. Two months later, we used the same strategy.

In the *Tribune* article Virginia had made the incident the basis of a tribute to Howard's resourcefulness.

I never knew what there was about Virginia Rocklin that disturbed me. It couldn't have been anything in her appearance. She was one of the best-looking girls I knew — tall, slim, completely poised.

Maybe it was her poise that bothered me. Heaven knows why these cool intelligent women always give me a feeling of frustration.

I said, "What's this favor you came to ask?"

She smiled. "I want to know if you can give me every afternoon next week, except, of course, matinee days."

"What on earth for?"

"To run out to the St. Albans Naval Hospital. Some of the boys — wounded vets, but they get around — are putting on a couple of one-act plays. They've been rehearsing on their own, but they need a final week of professional polishing."

"It just happens," I said, "I'm pretty much tied up all next week —"

"With something more important than helping a bunch of wounded kids?"

I made circles on the dressing table with my finger. It was impossible to explain to Virginia — or to anybody else — about the afternoon arrangements for next week. You couldn't very well talk about such things when they concerned another man's wife.

Still, I reasoned, Lynn Reed would understand if I broke my dates with

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her to go to the hospital. In all probability she'd even urge me to do it. "Darling, we can't be childish," she'd said to me more than once. "We mustn't count *too* heavily on the afternoons. Some days I won't be able to see you at all; others you won't be able to see me." For all her recklessness, Lynn had common sense.

I got up, took off the blue kimono, tossed it over the back of my chair. "All right, Ginny. I'll do what I can."

"Thanks!" Dropping a friendly man-to-man pat on my arm, she went to the door. With her hand on the knob, she looked back in a kind of appraisal. After a time she shook her head and smiled.

"George, did I ever tell you I like you?"

I bowed. "No, but I'm flattered."

"Of course, sometimes you're an awful heel, too — and I'd love to give you a good swift kick in the pants. But I love you anyway."

She laughed and pulled the door open.

Howard Reed almost fell into the room.

Obviously he'd been about to enter when Virginia threw him off balance. He stumbled, caught at the outer knob, and leaned against the door to steady himself. His heavy face was already made up, and he wore his first-act tweeds. Despite the fact that he seemed ready for the curtain to rise, I thought I'd never before seen him quite so sodden, so unequal to giving a performance.

"George," he said, ignoring Virginia Rocklin, "I'm drunk."

"Man, you smell it!"

"I'm good and drunk — drunk enough to tell you what I think of you, George. I think you're a louse."

Something inside me tightened.

"You think you and my wife are putting something over on me?" he said. "You think I'm blind? Dumb?"

I wished Virginia Rocklin weren't standing there, hearing every word. "Look here, Howard —"

"Shut up. I'm just drunk enough to beat the hell out of you tonight. I'm sick of having my wife make a fool of me with every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes along. Maybe you think I don't know where she was yesterday afternoon. And other afternoons. *Up in your apartment* — that's where she was!"

He heaved his massive body away from the door and started toward me. Virginia sprang in front of him, put her hands against his chest. "Stop it, Howard!" she whispered. "You're *on* in five minutes!"

He pushed her aside with a lumbering sweep of his arm, and came at me again. The last thing I wanted was a fight with him. We couldn't risk blood or bruises on either of us. There was nothing to do but step out of his way, try to talk him into saving this scene until after the show.

But Howard took a furious swing at my head. It was a drunken swing, blind, without direction. It missed by a wide margin, and the momentum of it spun him around.

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That was too much for his balance. He struck a chair, lost his footing completely. As he went down I managed to catch him and ease the fall. Still, the back of his head thudded against the wall. He pushed his fingers into his hair — grimacing with pain — making far more of it, I thought, than the bump warranted. He was still holding his head when the picture of John Barrymore dropped from its nail directly above him and the corner of the frame grazed Howard's cheek.

It wasn't a deep cut, yet it began to bleed. He put a hand to his face, blinked in amazement at the blood on his palm. "What the hell —" he said.

By that time a number of people were running into my dressing room — Howard's crash to the floor had been noisy. Fat Willard Gorbey, the stage manager, came first, breathless, followed by Pete Snyder, the prop man, and big Larry Vaughn. When Gorbey saw his star sitting on the floor, drunk and dazed and with a bleeding gash in his face, he groaned, "*This* we needed!"

And then Lynn walked in, with Charlie Dixon behind her. With more anger than alarm, she went to kneel beside her husband. From his breast pocket she took a handkerchief, wiped the blood from his face.

What she whispered to him I couldn't catch, because Willard Gorbey was asking for the second or third time in a tone of rising desperation, "What the devil happened? What *is* this, George?"

"He took a poke at me," I said. "He missed and keeled over."

"He thinks a poke is a good idea at 8:35!" Gorbey said. "In five minutes the curtain should go up, and look at him! Even sober, how could he go on with that butchered face?"

"Where's Mark Seller?" I asked.

"Speaking at some fool banquet! Tonight of all nights!" And then Willard Gorbey, as if realizing that the responsibility for this performance was wholly his, turned to Charlie Dixon. "Get ready, Charlie. Tonight *you* go on!"

Young Charlie Dixon's eyes became bright; he was the only one who could find any happiness in this situation. "Five minutes!" he said eagerly as he ran off. "I'll be ready in five minutes!"

Charlie really surprised us with the performance he gave. Of course, it didn't have the suavity of Howard's, or the polished assurance. Rather, it was like everything else about the understudy — sharp, abrupt, incisive.

At the end of the first act I congratulated Charlie; we all did; then I hurried to my dressing room, to find Lynn waiting for me.

"Tell me about it," she said. "What got into Howard?"

So I shut the door and told her. She listened without saying a word. When I finished, I asked, "How did Howard find out you were with me yesterday?"

"He's had me watched," Lynn said bitterly. "Tonight he told me — he's been paying a man to watch me!"

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"Good Lord!"

"It's more than I can take, George. It's cheap and revolting — and humiliating!"

I stepped close to her, behind her, and put my hands on her arms. They were lovely arms to hold. "I wouldn't worry too much, Lynn," I whispered. "This may make things simpler."

She had told me long ago — almost the first time we'd had lunch together — that she intended to divorce Howard. For the present it was only the success of *Witchcraft* that was keeping her close to him. She was a trouper with a job to do; she owed loyalty to the play, to Mark Seller, to the rest of us involved in the show. But the day after its final curtain, she intended to be on her way to Reno.

"I've got to change," she said, turning. She smiled up at me without much humor, patted my cheek in an encouraging way. "Sorry you had to have all that fuss with him, dear." Then she went off to her room.

It was hard for me to recapture the mood of *Witchcraft*, and yet the play went along with astonishing smoothness. Lynn did a perfect job. Charlie continued to be good. Nothing went wrong until we reached that final scene, in which I shoot the menace at his desk.

And then — well, I drew the .22 from the pocket of my tweed jacket as I drew it every night. I aimed straight at Charlie Dixon's chest. He sat back, smiling the way Howard Reed always smiled, with more contempt than fear. And he uttered the lines I'd heard every night for five months: "Put that thing away. You can't settle a problem like this with a bullet."

"Can't I?" I said. "Let's just see."

And I fired.

Howard Reed usually rose an inch or two, stared at me in surprise as he put a hand to his chest, and then slowly collapsed across the desk. But Charlie Dixon didn't do that at all.

Charlie's body jerked. He turned a little, away from the audience, while one shoulder hunched up in a kind of agony. My first thought was, Lord, he's hamming it! But then I saw something that made me stand in a stupor, cold, almost dropping the gun, and forgetting I had to go to the telephone and call the police.

I saw a dark red splotch spread over Charlie Dixon's shirt.

He slumped on the arm of the chair, with his back still to the audience. A few drops of blood splashed on the floor beside him. . . .

Far behind Charlie, in the wings, Willard Gorbey made frantic gestures to me. Somehow I remembered to go to the stage telephone.

Let me say this for Lieutenant Walter McComb of Homicide: Though he was a big, bloated, slow-moving man with curly red hair that needed trimming, he also turned out to be as calm, logical, and fair a policeman as you would want to meet.

"Well, seems there's no question about *who* killed him, anyhow," he said. "Mr. Wyatt here admits he's the

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one who shot the bullet. You all saw him do it, and there were more than 800 witnesses in the audience who saw him do it. So there's no problem about who I have to book."

I said in amazement, "You don't mean to say you're going to *arrest* me for this!"

"Sure. Got to."

"But why?" I exclaimed. "How was I to know there was a real bullet instead of a blank in that gun? I didn't commit any crime. I was just doing my job. I had no more to do with this than —"

"Did you shoot the bullet into him?"

"Yes, but —"

McComb looked at me in a thoughtful way. "I'm not accusing you of murder, Mr. Wyatt. Don't get me wrong. Morally, I guess most of us would agree, you really didn't murder him at all — unless *you* happened to be the one who loaded the gun with a real slug."

"I wasn't. I *liked* Charlie Dixon!"

"But that bullet might not have been meant for Dixon at all," McComb pointed out. "It was probably meant for Howard Reed. You folks all say you didn't know till the last minute — till just before the curtain went up — that Reed wouldn't be able to go on tonight. By the time Charlie Dixon took Reed's place, the slug was probably already in the gun, waiting for Reed."

"And if *I'd* put it there for him," I said, "do you think I'd have aimed straight at *Charlie Dixon?* I could have shot over Charlie's head or to the side. Why would I deliberately kill him?"

McComb nodded. "You've got something there, Mr. Wyatt. With that kind of argument your lawyer ought to get you off easy. I wouldn't worry. But meanwhile I got to drag you in."

In spite of my bitterness I had to respect the logic of the man. I stood silent while he questioned all the others on the stage. We were still there, with the curtain down.

But when at last police photographers crowded around Charlie Dixon's body and the medical examiner arrived, McComb and a few of his men herded the whole group of us into Howard Reed's dressing room. We sat down where we could. I found Virginia beside me on one side, Larry Vaughn on the other. Glancing at Virginia's taut face, I couldn't help thinking, Baby, this is one time you won't have any trouble getting *Witchcraft* into the papers.

Then my eyes went to Lynn. I wished she'd look up at me. I wanted at least a reassuring nod. But she was frowning at the floor.

I lifted my glance to Howard.

He stood behind his wife — sober now, grave. A few hours had done a lot to steady him. On his cheek two strips of adhesive tape held down a bandage over the cut. Despite it, he looked quite dignified. Howard was playing the gentleman. Yet, watching his powerful face, I couldn't help wondering how he felt. It must have

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been pretty grim for him to realize that somebody hated him enough to arrange his death, and whenever he'd looked at the body of Charlie Dixon to think, There, but for the grace of God and a few glasses of liquor . . .

"Let's see just what we've got here," Lieutenant McComb said.

He sent a speculative glance around the room.

"Snyder," he said to the skinny prop man, "you're the one whose job it is to load the gun. Right?"

Pete Snyder nodded jerkily, his eyes scared.

"You said you'd loaded it today with the usual blank cartridge," McComb went on.

"Positively," Snyder said. "It was a blank, same as any other day."

"And you put that blank into the gun about 5:15 this afternoon?"

"Right after the matinee performance," Snyder said. "Other days I get my props set before the night show — about 7:30. But on matinee days — Wednesday and Saturday — I get everything fixed right after the afternoon show. Then I know it's done."

"Did you look at the gun again at any time before the evening show?"

"No; wasn't any need to."

"So that between 5:15 and 8:40 or so, when the show started, anybody who happened to come on the stage could have changed the blank cartridge in the gun for a real bullet."

"Y-yeah," Pete Snyder said. "I guess that's right."

"Where would the gun be during all that time?"

"In the drawer of the desk on the stage. That's where it always stays. This show's got only one set. At the beginning of Act Three Mr. Wyatt is onstage alone. He takes the gun out of the drawer and puts it into his pocket. There wouldn't have been any reason for the gun being any place except in the desk drawer." Snyder glanced at me, then added, "After every performance I sort of make sure to get the gun back from Mr. Wyatt and put it in the desk."

"And you did that after today's matinee?"

"Absolutely."

McComb's thoughtful eyes went to a couple of stage hands, to fat Willard Gorbey, to Lynn and Howard Reed. In the end they fixed themselves on Larry Vaughn. The lean young playwright — his hair was upset and his skin looked gray — bent forward, hands clasped hard between his knees.

"Just by way of getting things right in my mind, Mr. Vaughn," McComb said, "what were *you* doing back here tonight?"

"I come every night. To watch. This happens to be my first play. I sort of brood over it. I fuss and worry — and I get a big kick out of it."

"Every night for five months?" McComb sounded skeptical.

"Well, almost every night. Now and then I miss a performance."

"Were you here this afternoon?"

"Part of the time. I left a little after 4 to go to a party."

"And when did you get back?"

"About 8:15."

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"Of course, you saw nobody touch the gun —"

"No. I told you that before."

McComb sighed. He glanced at Virginia Rocklin. "You don't really belong here either, do you?" he said.

"Not by right of being a member of the cast, no," she admitted. "I just came backstage to talk to Mr. Wyatt — at a little after 8."

"And stayed."

"Out of curiosity, yes. I wanted to see what sort of performance Charlie Dixon would give."

Another detective walked into Howard Reed's dressing room, and McComb looked at him with an unspoken question. The man shook his head.

"The guy at the stage door says nobody came in tonight except the regular crowd," he reported. "And, of course, Miss Rocklin here and Vaughn."

McComb's eyes went over us again, moving slowly from face to face.

"You expecting Mr. Seller soon?" McComb asked Willard Gorbey.

"Any minute. I called the hotel where he'd gone to a banquet, but they said he left just before 11. So I called his home. He hadn't got in yet. I left word with his wife."

"Seller was here this afternoon, wasn't he?"

"Sure, till about 5:30."

McComb put both hands into his trouser pockets, jingled a few coins, and at last faced Lynn and Howard Reed. In some subtle way his manner changed. He seemed more cautious, more searching. It was as if, in coming to grips with the stars of the show, he knew he was about to pry into the heart of this business.

I felt a little sick. If this investigation went far enough — and I was sure that eventually it must — everything would become public knowledge. McComb would dig out the fact that Howard distrusted his wife to the point of hiring a private detective to trail her; he'd learn that Lynn had spent several afternoons at my apartment. In the newspapers the thing would sound sordid and ugly and cheap. In fact, I told myself bitterly, it *was* sordid and ugly and cheap.

"I don't like to go over the same ground again, Mr. Reed," McComb was saying. "Still, we got to get these details fixed right. Let's make sure of one thing: Up to 8:35 tonight *you* were set to go on the stage?"

"Yes."

"In spite of the fact that you came in drunk, nobody had any reason to think Dixon would go on in your place?"

"These people," Howard said dryly, "have learned to take my drinking pretty much for granted. If it weren't for the accident with the picture, if my face hadn't been cut, I think I could have given a fair performance."

"About that accident now —" McComb cleared his throat. "Just why did you take a swing at Wyatt?"

I drew the cigarette from my mouth, looked hard at it. This was the moment. If Howard told anything at all, he'd have to tell everything.

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"God knows," Howard said, shaking his head. "I was too cockeyed drunk to know what I was doing."

"Even so," McComb said, "you were ready to go on and act. Nobody could *foresee* that John Barrymore's picture would fall and gash your face, keeping you off the stage."

"That's right."

"So, if the gun was loaded long before the show, we're safe in assuming the bullet was meant for *you* and not for Dixon. It brings up the question — who'd want to kill you?"

"I wish I knew," Howard said. "It never occurred to me that I was making any deadly enemies around here. I can't believe it. These stage hands and the electricians — why, I hardly know them except as familiar faces around the stage. What could I possibly have done to any of them that would call for murder? As for Willard Gorbey here and Larry Vaughn — why, we're friends. I may have annoyed them sometime when I was drunk, but surely not enough to make them want to *kill* me. And if you narrow it down to the cast — well, you've got only Mr. Wyatt and my wife. You've already eliminated Wyatt. As he says, even if he did have some reason to shoot me — which I can't conceive — he would hardly have used the bullet on Charlie Dixon as a substitute victim. And as for my wife —" Howard smiled a little. Standing behind Lynn, he put a hand on her shoulder and said in an almost joking way, "Darling, *do* you hate me enough to kill me?"

Lynn ignored his question. Looking up at McComb, she said:

"Aren't we overlooking a very serious point, lieutenant? Charlie Dixon wasn't killed until almost 11 o'clock. If it was somebody here — somebody in the theater — who put the bullet into the gun before the show, intending it for my husband, he'd have had several opportunities to get it *out* of the gun again during intermissions. He'd easily have been able to save Charlie's life."

"Don't men work on the stage during intermissions?" McComb asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Then they'd have seen anybody fussing with the gun. He'd have had to explain." McComb shrugged. "The only other explanation, of course, is that the bullet was put into the gun this afternoon by somebody who wasn't here tonight — somebody who couldn't know that Charlie Dixon had taken your husband's place."

He might just as easily have said, "Mark Seller."

To me, at the beginning, the thing was absurd. Mark was one of the sweetest old men in show business. He was 68, and he had enough friends in New York to fill the Yankee Stadium. True, he occasionally lost his temper, but basically he was a friendly man. If Mark Seller was capable of trying to kill the star who was helping him make a fortune with *Witchcraft*, he'd lost his mind.

McComb had hardly finished speaking when Mark himself came in.

When he decided Lieutenant Mc-

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Comb was in charge, he asked in a breathless voice, "How did it happen? How in heaven's name could such a thing happen?"

"We're trying to find out," McComb said. "You Mark Seller?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Well, maybe you can help."

"Help? God, the thing doesn't make any sense to me — not any sense at all!"

Beside me Virginia Rocklin had been fingering her cigarette lighter. As Seller spoke, she opened her purse to drop the thing inside. I don't know what made me glance down — the movement of her hands, perhaps. Anyway, I had a brief glimpse of some of the things inside the purse.

Virginia wasn't aware of my glance. I sat very still, not looking at her, not letting my expression change — just wondering why there should be a .22 blank cartridge in her bag.

On Monday, Mark Seller brought down his lawyer, a clever little fellow named Spiro, to plead for me. Spiro called everybody except the judge by his first name. He argued, "George Wyatt is no more guilty than the gun which fired the bullet — both were used by somebody else. After legally shooting at a man eight times a week for five months with blank cartridges, he had no reason to suspect anything would be different at this performance."

Since no one from the district attorney's office opposed him, he had no particular trouble getting me bail.

By 2 o'clock Monday afternoon Mark Seller was driving me home in his car.

"Georgie," he said, "it's a terrible mess. I can't figure what to do."

"Nothing," I said. "From this point on you leave it to the police."

"There are some things the police don't bother about." He frowned. "It turns out, for instance, that Charlie Dixon was supporting a mother and a young sister. He didn't carry much insurance, either. I'll send 'em a check, of course. But I was thinking maybe we could run a benefit performance."

I gave him a sideward glance. "Does that mean you're going on with it."

"Certainly I'm going on with the show. Why shouldn't I go on? We're sold out for almost eight weeks." Then he turned to me in alarm, wide-eyed. "Georgie, you're not thinking of walking out on us?"

"It's going to be pretty tough when I shoot at Howard every day. I think the audience, too, will do a bit of squirming. There'll be a ghost hanging over the play."

"That's nonsense. Here we got a smash hit — No, Georgie, we can't close. We're shut down today, yes, in deference to Charlie Dixon; and we'll keep the curtain down tomorrow, too — the funeral's tomorrow. But I can't see any reason why we shouldn't reopen Wednesday. As a matter of fact, the police *want* me to reopen."

I stared. "Why? What's it matter to the police?"

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"It'll hold the group together," Mark Seller said. "Makes the investigation easier. Once we shut down and let people drift off to other jobs, they'll be scattered all over the place.

"So you've got to come along with us, Georgie," Mark said, his tone persuasive. "I talked to Lynn and to Howie yesterday, and it's all right with them; they'll play out the run."

"In that case," I said, "count on me."

For a while, after we turned into Fifth Avenue, Mark said nothing. Then his voice became gentle, almost fatherly.

"One thing more, Georgie. You won't feel hurt if I give you some advice? About — Lynn."

I stiffened.

"Mind I'm not blaming you. She's a beautiful woman. If I were 30 years younger and single, I'd get excited about her myself. But, just for the sake of peace now, I think you two should get some sense. Behave like grown-ups."

"Where did you get all this inside information about us, Mark?"

"From Howie."

"Oh?"

"The police know it too, Georgie. They're not saying anything to the newspapers, because what's the sense of making a smell? But they know. This Lieutenant McComb — he's stubborn. He sticks like a leech. Yesterday he spent practically all day with Howie and Lynn. Howie got tired and angry and impatient, and then he started taking a few drinks. And by 5 o'clock he couldn't hold his tongue any more."

"So my big romantic secret," I said bitterly, "is on the police blotter."

Mark Seller sighed. "You got nobody to blame, Georgie."

I turned to him in anger. "Look, Mark. Let's get this straight. I let myself go with Lynn because she's washed up with Howard. She'd made up her mind to divorce Howard long before anything happened between her and me."

"Sure," Mark said with a wise nod. "I know. That's what she told Larry Vaughn almost seven months ago. You don't think you're the only one who ever fell for her, do you, Georgie? Larry had the same trouble once."

I stared.

"Only Larry had sense," Mark said. "A playwright is *supposed* to have brains. Or maybe he was afraid of Howard — I wouldn't know. Anyhow, he quit playing around with Lynn, and then everything was all right. But a lot of men have had the same trouble about Lynn Reed, Georgie. Sometimes, judging by the signs, I thought even Charlie Dixon —"

"Mark," I said in a tight whisper, "if anybody else talked to me like this about Lynn, I'd paste him in the nose!"

Mark Seller smiled. "That's one of the compensations for getting old, Georgie — people don't hurry to paste you in the nose when you tell them a few plain truths."

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When Mark dropped me at my door, I went up to my apartment in a sullen mood. As I entered, the telephone rang.

Lynn said in a strained voice, "George —"

"Oh," I said. "Hello."

"I just called Spiro's office. They told me you'd been released."

"On bail," I said. "Mark's money."

"George —" she paused. "I'm at the Pierre. I left Howard last night."

I knew I should have been excited, enthusiastic, and I waited for the sensation to start. Instead, a queer numbness crept over me.

"Can you come over, George?"

"I guess so. Give me time to shower and shave."

"I simply had to do it, George. Howard told the police how things were between us, and after that — well, in all *decency* I had to leave him."

"Sure," I said. "I understand. Matter of pride. Well, see you in an hour."

Somehow I wasn't in any mood to hurry about anything, not even for Lynn. Instead I settled in my deepest chair. I hadn't realized how tired I was.

I said to myself, *You killed a man. You shot a bullet right into the heart of a nice, unoffending kid. It's going to take quite a bit of forgetting.* And then I thought, *Maybe it's crazy to keep reminding myself of it eight times a week, even to please Mark Seller and the police.*

How strong, I wondered, would the trouper instinct be in Howard and Lynn now, in their new situation? Would they still want to continue playing opposite each other in *Witchcraft* — especially after the Broadway columns told of their separation, and audiences began to titter at their love scenes? . . .

The telephone rang again.

"Hello, George," a voice said. "Mark just told me you're home. I called to say I'm glad. Hope it wasn't too rough an ordeal."

"Virginia?" My mind sprang, as it had a hundred times, to a .22 blank cartridge in the bottom of a purse. "Ginny," I said, "it's good to hear you. Can you come over here right away?"

She hesitated. "Couldn't you come to the office, George? My desk is piled high with —"

"This isn't office talk."

She said "Oh?" And then, "All right."

When Virginia came, she didn't look like someone who'd been close to murder. In fact, she looked very well. She carried a red-leather bag, flat and oblong — not the purse she'd had at the theater the night of Charlie Dixon's death.

"Ginny," I said, when she'd sat down and taken the cigarette I offered, "there's one thing about you — you make the world seem normal."

"How nice." She smiled. "And here, all these days, I thought I irritated you."

"That was last week."

"When I wanted you to work at the Naval Hospital."

I'd forgotten about that. It came

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as a jolt. "Say! Are those boys expecting me?"

"No. I got Willard Gorbey to go. Didn't think you'd be in the mood. How about telling me why you asked me to dash over?"

I watched her obliquely.

"Ginny," I said, "maybe the direct way is best. I wanted to know what a blank cartridge was doing in your purse Saturday night."

I could feel the tension.

"How do you know about that, George?"

"I saw it."

"And — you didn't tell? Why not?"

"Probably because I didn't want to implicate you in this mess."

Virginia slowly rose. She looked at me, deep into me, in a strange and searching way.

"You didn't want to implicate me," she repeated. "And yet, for all you knew, that blank was the one for which a real bullet had been substituted in the gun, and maybe I was the one who did it. . . . George, do you know what silence deserves?"

"Sure. A squawk from the police."

"No. This." Virginia put both hands on my cheeks and kissed me. When she sat down again, I needed a moment to steady myself.

"Now I feel better," she said.

"You're a very upsetting person," I answered. "Now, how about telling me how that blank got into the purse?"

"You'll think I'm a fool."

"Try me."

"A little while before we all went into Howard's dressing room," she said, "I asked Lieutenant McComb if it wouldn't be easy to find out whether anybody connected with the show had bought .22-caliber bullets. Couldn't he check stores, dealers?"

"You can get them in any sporting-goods shop."

"That's what McComb told me. In fact, he laughed at me. He said the police would investigate it, of course, as a matter of routine, but there wasn't a chance in a million of getting anywhere that way. Well, I'm a skeptic, George. So I decided to test it for myself. I took one of the blanks from Pete Snyder's box — he knew about it, and so did McComb — and this morning I went shopping, trying to match its size with a real bullet."

The tightness of my nerves began to relax.

"Ginny," I said, "the kind of relief I feel right now calls for a drink."

When I came back with a couple of highballs, she took a swallow or two, then said:

"The last man I drank with, George, was Lieutenant McComb. Yesterday evening."

"So? You work fast."

"No, he does. He came up to question me after he left Howard and Lynn. I was making myself some spaghetti and meat balls, and it smelled good. So he stayed for dinner."

"By this time," I said, "he ought to have some ideas. Who does *he* think put that bullet in the gun?"

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"You, George."

The thing hit me like a punch. "*Me?*"

"He knows you're in love with Lynn. And he believes Howard would contest any divorce proceedings she might start. So he has an idea you might have wanted to kill Howard in order to free Lynn for yourself."

"But I thought I'd made him *see* that I wouldn't have had to shoot Charlie!"

"Not unless you had another motive which would have applied to Charlie. You might have hated Charlie Dixon for the same reason you hated Howard. Charlie, too, had a case on Lynn. Or didn't you know?"

Losing interest in my drink, I put the glass aside. My voice sounded harsh. "No, I didn't know. Mark Seller hinted at it today, but I didn't know."

Virginia took another sip. "McComb told me about the report Howard got from his private detective. You wouldn't have liked it, George. There — there was one day when Lynn didn't visit *you*. She went to — Charlie's place."

I had a sick feeling. I didn't want to hear any more.

Virginia asked quietly, "Who do *you* think did it, George?"

"I don't know."

"No ideas?"

"Plenty of ideas," I said. "But they all concern people I happen to like, and I feel like a heel when I even think —"

Somebody rang the doorbell.

As I crossed the room, Virginia murmured something about it probably being Lieutenant McComb. "He wants a heart-to-heart session with you, George."

But it wasn't Lieutenant McComb.

It was Howard Reed.

He stood outside the open door, unmoving, with his hat in his hand. For a time we just looked at each other. He was haggard and tired and worn.

"Well," I said at last, "if you're going to start swinging again, get it over with."

"No," Howard said. "I just want to talk."

I stepped back from the door, and he came in, walking slowly, deliberately. He nodded to Virginia. She was gathering up her purse and gloves, saying something about leaving; but Howard waved to her in a weary way, as though it didn't matter whether she went or stayed.

"Don't bother going on account of me," he said. "I don't seem to have any secrets from anyone any more."

"Sit down," I said to him and shut the door.

As he tossed his hat away and sat, he fixed his eyes on Virginia's highball. They were thirsty eyes. He said, "You couldn't spare another one of those, could you, George?"

"Sure," I said.

"Straight, please."

I went into the kitchenette and poured half a tumblerful. That ought to hold him, I thought. And all the time I wondered what he wanted

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here. When I gave him the glass, he swallowed a big gulp of the drink, licked his lips. He peered at me in a searching way.

"George, I've got to talk straight," he said. "I've got to *have* it straight. Never mind anybody's feelings."

"Go ahead."

"Are you going to marry Lynn?"

He might as well have driven a fist into my stomach. It stopped my breath. I looked hard into his face, and it was a pathetic face; hurt, miserable, scared.

"Because if you are," he said, "all right. I'll let it go. If that's the way Lynn really wants it, let her have it. But if you two are just kidding each other, just having a good time the way she's had good times with the others —" He stopped, waiting, with agony in his eyes.

"Then what?" I asked.

Howard stared down at his glass. After a moment he swallowed what was left in it, and his shoulders went limp. "I don't know. I guess I'd try to make her come back."

I looked at Virginia. All of a sudden I felt sorry for Howard Reed. I pitied him with all my heart, though the pity was partly contempt. It seemed to me I was beginning to understand Howard. I could even see why he drank so hard.

"Well, if you want it straight," I said, "the answer is no."

He half rose. His eyes widened and there was a light in them. I could see what he needed, so I went into the kitchenette, got the bottle, and put it on the table beside him. He poured with a shaky hand.

"Would — would you *tell* her that, George?"

"If it'll help."

I could feel Virginia staring at me in a strange way.

"Give me a few minutes to shave and shower," I said to Howard, "and we'll go over to the Pierre together."

Then I went into the bedroom.

While I stripped down to my shorts I did some bitter thinking. Had Howard asked me a week ago if I intended to marry Lynn, my answer would no doubt have been a noble yes; I'd probably have hammed the scene with a Galahad pose. A week ago I'd been quite idealistic about the whole affair. But now the blood of Charlie Dixon stained things between Lynn and me, and what I'd learned about her today soured a lot of my feelings. I was faintly disgusted with myself.

I laughed a bit grimly as I lathered my face. I kept looking at my reflection — until a strange notion struck me. It hit so hard that I stood still, staring, forgetting to shave.

After that I took a long time with the shower and dressing — the better part of a half hour. When I came into the living room, the bottle of whisky was almost empty.

"I tried to make him go easy, George," Virginia said with a shrug, "but he wouldn't listen."

Howard sat hunched forward, staring dully at the wall.

"You're a sight," I said to him. "If

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you think I'm going to drag a staggering drunk through the lobby of the Pierre, you're crazy. Suppose I ask her to come here?"

Howard nodded.

My call found Lynn mildly exasperated. "For heaven's sake, George," she said, "where are you?"

"Home," I told her. "Howard's here. Can you get over? We may as well get this thing settled."

She hesitated. "Is he very drunk?"

"Yes."

"I rather imagined so. . . . Well, all right. Give me about twenty minutes." And then she added, more sharply, "By the way, Mark Seller and Larry Vaughn are on the way to your place. Get rid of them, will you?"

That surprised me. "What do *they* want?"

"I called Mark to tell him I couldn't go on with the show. The way things stood, either Howard or I would have to drop out. So he and Larry rushed over here to plead with me, to talk me into staying. They didn't get very far. I think they're going to ask *you* to persuade me. Get them out before I come, will you, George?"

"I'll try."

The odd thing was that I'd hardly put the telephone down when Mark and Larry Vaughn rang at the door. Virginia let them in.

"Look, Georgie—" Mark Seller caught the lapel of my jacket. He talked in a pleading way. "You got to help me drive some sense into Lynn. She's got a run-of-the-play contract, hasn't she? Now, just because she has a falling-out with Howie here, why should we all have to throw away a fortune? Why should Larry lose maybe another year of royalties? Why should a good play be closed—"

"Save it, Mark," I said. "Lynn's on the way. We'll talk when she comes." I turned to Howard, got a grip under his arm, and lifted his sagging bulk out of the chair. "You're going to lie down till she gets here," I said. "See if you can sober up a little."

He almost fell. If Virginia hadn't caught his other arm, he might have gone down. As it was, he hung limp between us. Before we could get him as far as the bedroom, the doorbell rang once more.

Virginia and I waited while Larry Vaughn opened the door.

Four men were out there. The one who came in first was McComb.

He gave us nods, sent a cynical glance over Howard Reed, then turned to the men who followed him.

Two of them I remembered seeing Saturday night at the theater; they were detectives. The other was a bald, scrawny little fellow, so nervous he twisted his hat in his hands.

"Mr. Slake," McComb said by way of explanation.

Mr. Slake peered hard at Howard, at me, at Larry, at Mark. By the manner in which he thrust his head forward I judged he must be myopic. He seemed to be studying each of us with intensity, seeking something.

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Virginia said, "This pantomime is fascinating, but Howard's weight is getting me down."

"Just a minute," I said to McComb.

Virginia and I got Howard into the bedroom, where he collapsed across the bed. I followed Virginia back into the living room and shut the door.

"It's about those bullets," McComb was saying to Mark Seller. "We just didn't think the murderer would be fool enough to walk into any New York store and ask for a box of .22s, just like that. Too much danger of the salesclerk remembering his face afterward. Why should he take an unnecessary risk like that when he could get the bullets by mail order? Anyhow, it was an angle worth investigating.

"When you get down to mail-order houses that sell bullets," McComb went on, "you've at least got a limited field to work in, even if you include the manufacturers of ammunition. We figured the murderer would hardly have written to some house in the West or even in the Middle West. That way he'd make them wonder why he sent so far for his bullets. So, concentrating on houses in the East, we got our teletypes working late Saturday night. By noon today we had some reports. You'd be surprised to know how few boxes of .22s have been mailed to private individuals in the metropolitan area within the past week."

Larry asked, "How many?"

"Four. We checked on them all. Three of them went to legitimate addresses. *But the fourth went to a post-office box.*"

McComb paused.

"That box," he said, "was rented last Tuesday at the main branch of the post office by a Paul A. Wassler. He gave an address on East 39th Street. Now it turns out that Wassler is a phony. No such person known at that address."

Again he stopped. He got nothing but stares.

"So it's quite likely," McComb went on, "that the man we want, using the name of Wassler, got his bullets through a post-office box. In all probability he took the one cartridge he needed and threw the rest, with their carton, down some sewer. He probably threw the key of the post-office box away, too."

I said, "The clerk at the post office who rented the box to Wassler — would he remember the face?"

McComb motioned to Slake.

"Here he is," he said, with a trace of weariness. "Slake says he doesn't remember a damn thing."

"I see a thousand people a day at my window," the clerk protested. "How do I know they're murderers? Most times I don't even get a chance to look at their faces. All I'm interested in is what they want."

"Just the same," McComb said, "I made him examine the picture of every member of the *Witchcraft* cast. Nothing clicked. So we're taking him around for a personal look at everybody who was on the stage Saturday night — stage hands, electricians, Wil-

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lard Gorbey, Pete Snyder — everybody. Maybe in *seeing* a face Mr. Slake will remember."

But Slake, shaking his bald head in a hopeless way, said miserably, "I'm terrible on faces."

I thought again of the strange possibility that had struck me when I started shaving; an idea that had kept my nerves coiled tight ever since. Now it became exciting. It was this Mr. Slake who made it exciting. If we could combine my hunch with this matter of the post-office box . . .

"Look, lieutenant," I said. "I've got an idea about this murder.

"Maybe we've been going at this whole thing from the wrong angle," I told McComb. "From the start we've taken it for granted that the bullet was meant for Howard Reed. So we've been looking for somebody who had a reason to murder Howard Reed. Why don't we just accept Charlie Dixon's death at its face value and hunt for somebody who had a reason to murder *Charlie?*

"There's no use holding things back now," I said. "Let's be frank. You already know I was supposed to be in love with Lynn Reed. That's why Howard took a swing at me the other night. And you know — as I found out today — that Charlie Dixon, too, was in love with her; that she'd even visited him at his place. That being the case, didn't Howard have just as much reason to hate Charlie as he had to hate me? As far as he could see, we were *both* trying to steal his wife."

Mark Seller bent forward in his chair. "Georgie, are you trying to say *Howie* put that bullet in the gun?"

"That's right."

"Georgie, you're crazy."

Virginia, however, seemed to catch the full significance of the idea. She held her breath and her eyes flashed. It was as if she were seeing a revelation of her own.

"Crazy nothing!" she whispered. "I — think George has it! Get a man like Howard drunk enough, jealous enough — why *wouldn't* he go beserk and want to kill? And if George were held for the murder, Howard would be disposing of both men he hated at the same time!

"Howard certainly had plenty of *opportunity* to put that bullet into the gun. Suppose he crossed the stage some time after the matinee performance, stopped at the desk on his way out of the theater. Who'd have bothered to notice him? He crosses that stage for one reason or another every day, I'll bet.

"And after that, all he'd have had to do was arrange to have Charlie Dixon go on in his place Saturday evening!"

"There's the hitch, Miss Rocklin," McComb said. "Up to this point I'd say you've got something. But as I understand it, what kept Howard Reed off the stage at the very last minute was the cut he got when the picture fell on him. How could he have *arranged* to have that picture slash his face?"

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That seemed to stymie Virginia. In a helpless way she looked at me.

"I think Howard was counting on something else to keep him off the stage," I explained. "The kind of accident he could arrange. In fact, we saw it happen, Virginia and I. He came into my dressing room just before curtain time, took a wild swing at me, missed by a mile, and fell against the wall. That was action he *could* plan in advance. And if he could pretend to hurt himself — say by a bump on the head — that would be reason enough to keep him off the stage. He could practically knock himself out, or make it seem that way. And he *did* bump his head. It wasn't much of a bump. I remember how surprised I was to see the fuss he made over it. *That*, I think, was the pretext he intended to use to let Charlie go on in his place. The cut in his cheek was an unexpected thing — an accident. But he was smart enough to take advantage of it."

McComb looked at me in a thoughtful way.

"Of course," he said, "we have no proof."

"No," I admitted, "but we have Mr. Slake."

"Mr. Slake? He didn't recognize Howard Reed."

"But Howard doesn't know that. I'm wondering what his reaction would be if he were to be waked up in there with Mr. Slake pointing at him and saying, 'That's the man who rented the box! That's Wassler!' "

McComb said slowly, "I see what you mean."

Maybe we shouldn't have done it — I don't know. Maybe it was cruel and inhuman. But, as McComb pointed out, so is murder.

We followed Lieutenant McComb into the bedroom. Howard lay on his back now, snoring a little.

McComb sat down on the edge of the bed like a doctor. He had to do quite a bit of shaking before Howard awoke.

"Come on, Reed," McComb said. "This man from the post office has recognized you as Paul Wassler."

At the beginning it didn't seem to register. But after a second or two, when it did hit home, it was as if Reed had awakened to find a gun pressed against his forehead.

"*What's* that?" he said.

"Mr. Slake here has identified you as Paul Wassler, who rented a box from him last Tuesday. Mr. Slake works at the post office."

Howard tried to sit up; he got as far as propping himself on an elbow.

McComb said, "Look at him, Reed. Don't *you* recognize Mr. Slake?"

That, I thought, was a masterpiece. It was perfect. For it was clear Howard did remember Mr. Slake. You could see the terror rise in him.

"What of it?" His voice shook badly. "What's that got to do with — I mean, what *is* all this?"

"Why, look," McComb said. "We know that a carton of .22s was shipped to Paul Wassler's box by Cullin, Ware & Company. So we know you had the

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bullets, Reed. We've got to take you along."

Howard had to swallow before he could say, "You're — *arresting* me?"

"Certainly. We've got everything we need, Reed. Motive — jealousy and hatred. Method — trying to knock yourself out just before the show when you bumped your head. Add that to the fact that you bought bullets under the name of Paul Wassler —"

The doorbell rang.

I said on impulse, "That's Lynn."

Nobody started for the door. Nobody stirred.

And then a queer thing happened. Howard Reed rose. Very slowly, swaying, he started across the room. Nobody interfered while he opened the door for his wife.

We couldn't see his face. Whatever its expression was, it made Lynn fall back a step. And then Howard whispered to her.

"*You* got me into this," he said. "Maybe it was *you* I should have killed. You, instead of Charlie. And maybe I ought to choke the life out of you *now*." His voice broke. He leaned on the door. When he talked again, after a moment, it was in a tone of bitter defeat. "But damn you, I — I'll probably be wanting you with all my heart when they strap me in the chair. Yes, even then. You — and a drink."

I felt a tense hand slip into mine, squeeze hard. Glancing around, I found Virginia beside me, strained. She was looking at the door. I squeezed her hand, too. Then we looked together as Lieutenant McComb went forward.

NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will bring you —

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An "unknown" story by Thomas Burke, author of the classic LIMEHOUSE NIGHTS *and "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole," voted the best detective short story ever written — "unknown," because to the best of our knowledge "The Pariah" has not been included in any of Thomas Burke's books . . . This tale of Nobby Jenkins, a modern Judas, is an unusual Christmas story, especially suited, we think, to the season which re-emphasizes the spirit of peace on earth, good will toward men. If only the jangle of pieces of silver were never to be heard again . . .*

THE PARIAH

by THOMAS BURKE

PIECES OF SILVER PASSED FROM THE police-sergeant to Nobby Jenkins, as they stood together in the bar of the *Blue Lantern*.

"That's what we arranged, ain't it?" said the sergeant.

"'At's right," replied Nobby. "I 'ope 'e don't git much of a stretch, though. 'E's a good feller. Not more'n twelve munce, I s'pose?"

The sergeant passed his hand across his mouth, as one wiping away an offensive taste. "Perhaps, and perhaps not. But now we got 'im, let me tell you, Nobby Jenkins, that I think you're the dirtiest, crawliest, smelliest little skunk I ever met in my fifteen years in the Y Division. And you know as well as I do that that means something."

"Skunk?" piped Nobby. "Skunk? Wodyeh mean? Who yeh talkin' to?"

"Talkin' to you, me boy. And I don't want none o' your back answers. Else you'll be in trouble. There's some 'ere that's always in trouble. There's Dick the Duke — gives us more trouble than all the rest of the boys put together. There's Spiv Bagster, who's done nearly everything. There's Robin Redbreast, who ain't stopped at murder. They're bad men — all of 'em. Very little they won't do. But there's one thing none of 'em's done yet, and never would do. Not one of those boys would sell 'is pal. They're bad men, but they draw the line there. That's why I say you're a skunk. You ain't a bad man. You ain't got pluck enough for that. All you can do is to sell better men than yourself, and men who've been a pal to you. You're just a skunk. Now bung off, quick, before you poison the air o' this bar. You've sold yer pal to me, and you've got yer price."

"'Ere, but — I mean — look 'ere, sergeant — I —"

The sergeant took one step towards him, and the man shot through the

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swing doors into the East India Dock Road. He stood for a moment on the curb, writhing in his clothes, as though to shake off the lashes that the sergeant's tongue had laid upon his back. His thin mouth curled. His wavering eyes essayed a chill brightness. Smart boys passed him with smiling girls. Chinese wandered in couples. Groups stood about, debating their recreation. Limehouse was opening to the evening, as heavily scented flowers open to the dusk. Fiddles began to scream, organs to jangle. Voices silent through the day lent their light noise to the street. It was as though imprisoned petals were released to the blue air.

Nobby Jenkins looked round for company, and saw none. In irritation he made for a bar, where he might find acquaintance and wash away the sergeant's impudence in drink. Him and his sermonizing — blast him! Coppers getting strait-laced! He sniggered at the idea. After all, Old Fred was nothing to him. They may have had drinks together, and gone about together, and all that — but was that any reason why he shouldn't be given up to the police after he'd done a burglary? Wasn't it a chap's duty to give criminals up to the police? How would the police go on if it wasn't for chaps like him, Nobby, to help them now and again? What if him and Fred had known one another for years, and shared money and festivities? A crime was a crime. As for the money — well, hadn't he been put to a lot of expense in the matter? And hadn't the police *offered* the money? Bah! He spattered oaths to the pavement about his feet as he moved towards the *Yellow Dragon.*

He entered the saloon bar, and slapped on the counter a piece of the silver he had just received. In the snug corner stood two or three men whom he knew. He took his glass and went to them, with his usual crooked smile. In a concerted movement each man of the group grabbed his glass and moved to the far corner of the bar away from him. He felt his face grow pale, his knees turn to water. He cocked his head and glared at the ceiling, but the physical strain of holding his head erect was more than he could long endure, and the effort of looking unconcerned brought a pain to his eyes. He drank up and slouched away with an attempted dignity of bearing that hurt even those who had avoided him.

He turned towards his back room in Poplar High Street. There he knew he would find comfort, and in that retreat could snap his fingers at the scorn of those others. On the way, various acquaintances, washed and garbed for their evening stroll, passed him or overtook him. Those who were alone looked the other way; those in couples looked at one another, and words passed between them that twisted their lips.

At last, with aching faculties, he reached his room, slammed the door behind him and locked it. From a battered tin box he took an opium layout; then shuffled to his pallet bed,

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cooked a portion of the precious maker of dreams, filled his pipe, and sucked heavily at it. Tranquil he lay, but not pretty to look upon. He was a skunk. So men thought of him; but his pipe many times had told him that he was a hero, a king of men, a great fellow. To the pipe he looked this time to reverse the sergeant's judgment. When the first pellet was finished, he took another; then a third and a fourth. Soon his eyes closed, a cloud gathered about his being, and his animal self was lost, and he was gathered into the kingdom of the white poppy . . .

A low, sharp cry cut into the silence that enveloped him, and shocked him into consciousness. Someone was urging him to lead on, and he found himself walking in a star-lit darkness across a waste place, while about him were many vague figures carrying swords and staves, and one with a rude iron lantern. He peered about him in the gloom, and found that he wore strange clothes, and that his companions also were clad in queer garments of a kind unknown to him. For a moment he hesitated; then he came sharply to himself, and remembered where he was and what he was about to do. He turned to those around him with upraised hand to enjoin stealth and discretion. With slow steps he led the way through a green thicket, and every step seemed familiar to him. As he went, his mind gloated upon what was to come when the business in hand was accomplished. The brambles fastened sharp fingers upon his garment, but he heeded them not, and pushed through them, while the lantern held by one behind him threw globes of light upon the stony ground about him. Suddenly, he turned and spoke clearly in a tongue that came easily to him:

"Lo, we are upon them."

They halted for a moment. Then, in a body, they broke from the thicket into a small clearing, where stood a group of men; and he, in advance of the company, stepped smilingly towards One of them, his Friend and Master, and kissed him. And the soldiers he led sprang forward and bound his Friend, and led Him away.

His work was done. He turned again into the bushes, and, by a different path from that which the soldiers were following, made eagerly for the palace. There he told them of what was done, and they paid to him 30 pieces of silver. These he put into his purse, and they jangled pleasantly in his ear as he walked to his lodging, where he slept serenely.

He was awakened in the morning by much tumult in the streets. He rose, arrayed himself in his rough garment, which, he promised himself, should soon be discarded for the fine linen he would buy with his store of silver, and went out to hear and see what was toward in the city. He went out jauntily, and soon was in the midst of a throng that cried aloud. At first he could not hear what they cried; then very clearly his ears gathered the hideous refrain, the hard voice of the crowd; and his burden

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that his Friend must die the death of a malefactor.

As though at a blow, his jaunty bearing fell from him, and a sudden chill seized him; and earth and air grew gray and still. He retired from the throng and leaned for a space against the walls of the Temple. Then, with an effort he braced himself, writhed in his robe, and went hurriedly toward the place where the merchants met. There he sought to ease his mind by examining the costly raiment they offered, and bargaining with them; but abruptly these things had lost their savor for him. He urged himself to master the disturbance that had fallen upon him, to dismiss weakness and sentimentality. Yet the oppression remained, and he left the marketplace without buying.

As the day rose to noon and declined to evening, the unrest grew in strength, and when the long shadows lay athwart the flat country, its bitterness was too keen to be borne. The jangle of the silver in his bag became a torment, so that he could have cried aloud. He told himself, in spoken words, that the jangle of the silver was musical; that he would make a brave figure in a robe of that Phoenician linen he had seen; that he was tired, and would be more himself on the morrow. But this availed nothing. Neither food nor wine could he touch that day; and at last, when night had sheathed the city and plain in the velvet darkness of the East, he hurried again to the palace. There he sought audience of those who had paid the money to him; and standing before them he told them of his sorrow, and handed them the purse. And they smiled grimly among themselves, and would not listen to him, saying that it was a matter that concerned himself alone.

Whereupon he tore the purse from his girdle, and flung it at the feet of the mocking company, and gathered up his robes and ran into the night. As he ran he sobbed, so sharp was his anguish.

Whither he was running he scarce knew or cared, but, as he reached the outer buildings of the city and climbed the wall which enclosed it from the stony countryside, he knew that he ran in that direction for some purpose. Suddenly, in the midst of an untilled field, he saw a lonely tree, and he knew it was to that tree that he was running.

His mind ceased its functions, while, cumbrously, he climbed to the upper branches. With big movements he loosened the girdle from his waist. One end of it he made fast to a sturdy bough of the tree, looking keenly to the knot, as one making fast a sail. At its other end he fashioned a loop. This he placed about his neck. Two paces he made along the bough whereon he rested, when a long cry, the cry of the multitude, came to him from the city; and the field closed upon him, rushing towards the tree. He closed his eyes to receive the shock . . .

When he opened them he saw only

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four dim walls, and he found himself prone on the pallet bed in his Poplar lodging. The cry of the multitude had burst from his own throat, and he repeated it as he leaped from the bed, knocked over the layout, and staggered to the window. He flung it open and gulped in the cool air that rushed from the river, tearing his clothes apart to receive its happy salutation. He turned then to the water in his enamel wash-basin, buried his face in it, swallowed some mouthfuls of it, and collapsed, panting, on a rickety chair.

Slowly, sense and sanity came back to him, and the dream passed again in detail before him, and he remembered what had led to it. His hands dropped to his trousers pockets, and touched the pieces of silver. He snatched them back, and his fingers burned. From the deeps of misery he groaned aloud; and while his nerves yet shook he went out to the police station and asked for the sergeant. He blustered, disheveled, into the station, and one stopped him.

"I want the sergeant," he babbled.

The sergeant was seated on a stool before the desk. "Well, what's the matter with you, me boy?"

"Sergeant, I bin thinkin' it over — our business. I see now it was a dirty trick. I dunno what made me do it, sergeant. 'E's always bin me pal. And I sold 'im. And I didn't ought to have done it. I couldn't ever do a thing like that again. And I want to put this right. I want to —"

But the sergeant was busy and not inclined to listen to Nobby's protestations. He lifted a half-glance from his desk.

"Oh, shut yer row and bung off."

"No, but, sergeant — I don't want this money. I didn't ought to 'ave 'ad it. Take it back, sergeant. It's dirty. I wish I'd never seen it. Ain't there nothing I can do for Old Fred? Can't I take 'is place, sergeant? Gimme a chance to put it right. I didn't ought to —"

The sergeant raised a weary head. "Oh, go and hang yourself, yeh little skunk," he drawled, impersonally, and continued entering up the charge sheet.

But Nobby Jenkins knew that his punishment would be deeper than that. He knew that the last expiation was not for him; he had not the courage for it.

And if your business occasions you to Poplar you will hear of this strange creature, who haunts public-houses, and, in return for drinks, tells, with parrot-like repetition, how, on a starlit night 2000 years ago, he betrayed a Man in a garden to his enemies . . .

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

SOME WOMEN WON'T WAIT *by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER* (MORROW, $2.50)	". . . his sexiest book to date, and one of his liveliest and most enjoyable . . ." (AB)	". . . solution's clear enough — also predictable. Honolulu background and police work are fine." (LGO)
THE DOCTOR WAS A DAME *by SELDON TRUSS* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . disappointingly straightforward for Truss . . . satisfactory enough by other standards . . ." (AB)	". . . if you persevere, Truss's gay style will help you along the way." (LGO)
JUSTICE HAS NO SWORD *by MAX FRANKLIN* (RINEHART, $2.75)	". . . an obvious enough story redeemed by great accuracy and conviction in detail . . ." (AB)	". . . writing is awkward in spots and good in others . . . spirit and sincerity are obvious." (LGO)
THE BIG EAR *by STEWART STERLING* (DUTTON, $2.50)	"The minutiae are . . . fine . . . But the background demands a better story . . ." (AB)	"The initial premise may seem weak, but . . . pleasing and readable." (LGO)
STAND UP AND DIE *by FRANCES and RICHARD LOCKRIDGE* (LIPPINCOTT, $2.50)	"Quite the best Captain Heimrich to date. Very good writing." (FC)	"A lagging, conversational yarn . . ." (DD)
TWEAK THE DEVIL'S NOSE *by RICHARD DEMING* (RINEHART, $2.50)	"The case . . . isn't bad . . . quietly humorous telling is even better." (AB)	". . . pleasantly down-to-earth and light in touch . . ." (LGO)
THE DEVIL'S CURRENT *by KEM BENNETT* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . well-constructed, underplayed tension . . . total effect is highly satisfactory." (AB)	"Ingredients of international chicanery kneaded into fantastic flubdubbery." (DD)
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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"The Cool-Lam loquacious badinage burdens . . . this jejeune divertissement." (DD)	"Okay, but sometimes tiresome, too." (FC)	
"Lively . . . Very slick job . . . Bright and British." (EW)	". . . quite silly if one bothers to analyze it at the end, but pleasant enough reading . . ." (H-M)	
". . . never a dull moment . . . whip-lash ending." (DQ)	"Honest and meritorious job. . . Pleasant but palpable." (SC)	
". . . this small town story carries as much impact as murder in the big city." (DBH)	"Merits plus mark." (SC)	
"As usual, the plot is almost impeccable . . . Grade A." (EW)	"Personnel credible; pace well maintained; telling wee bit mannered." (SC)	
". . . light, tough and sexy in very knowing proportions." (AdV)	"High finance, high politics, nightclubbers abound, but fail to stir blood." (SC)	
". . . exciting . . . Don't miss a word of this one; it's a wow." (DBH)	"Well-written, ill-organized . . . pace mixed. Give it a plus mark." (SC)	
". . . 22 vari-colored stories by acknowledged masters of their art . . . our whole-hearted recommendation." (H-M)	". . . up to the best in anthology . . . Only Queen's annual collection can be mentioned in the same bracket." (DBH)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville (Ind.) Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

DQ: *Dorothy Quick in her syndicated column*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

EW: *Elizabeth Watts in the Boston Globe*

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The third of the "new" Uncle Abner stories

THE DARK NIGHT

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

IT WAS NIGHT. THE DARK HAD FALLEN swiftly. The heavens had been overcast all day, with a shower of rain in the afternoon. There had been no twilight. The dark had suddenly descended like a black cup put down over the world. There was a threat of rain in the autumn night, and of the chill of the approaching winter.

The road, narrow and wooded on either side, went slowly up. There was no fence and occasionally the horse, missing his way, went into the bushes. It was incredibly dark; a thick palpable dark. Abner could not see the road. He could not see the big chestnut horse under him. But both my uncle and the horse knew the country and the road they traveled.

My uncle rode with the bridle slack in his hand. He was in a deep reflection, for he had come, without warning, on one of those mysterious complications of events that sometimes await us beyond a turn of the way.

Randolph, when he could not understand these things, used to write down as an explanation of his verdict that they had occurred by an act of God. But it was a term that my uncle vigorously rejected. God had no part in these affairs. Randolph would quote the English judges and Mr. Blackstone. But my uncle was sternly against the term. They were acts of the devil, and if Randolph wished to set down the truth, not by the act of God, but by the abandonment of God, his verdict should be written.

He had by chance turned aside one of these misleading verdicts.

But for him on this autumn evening, the plan not of God but of the devil would have gone forward, darkening the affair into a mystery that could not be solved, and must be dismissed with Randolph's verdict. But he had come on it, by chance, in time.

He rejected, also, that word "chance." It was a fool's word like so many others in our tongue. There was a purpose in every moving of events. Because the understanding of that purpose was denied us, we disclaimed the purpose. It was a way writ large in the affairs of men.

It was wisdom in my uncle to leave the horse to his devices. He knew the road, and whither his master journeyed. And he had the instincts of his race and his own experience to guide him. When my uncle's stirrup touched the bushes he corrected his direction, and so with care kept to the middle of the road. Perhaps, also, in the dark he could see better than the man, for

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his people carried no lights about the fields and had only their eyes to aid them. Doubtless in the old time, when the early man accepted the light the sky gave, he had as good an eye; when he ran in the dark by the wolf's muzzle, or fled from the trumpeting mastodon in the flat land, he was the equal in his parts of any other creature — his ear was as keen and his eye as able to manage in the dark. But when he got him lamps and candles and devious devices to help him out he became a lesser creature in himself.

And my uncle always remembered what we usually forget, that within the field of his activities, and according to his experience of life, the animal does not make mistakes. Errors are too deadly dangerous to him. A single one may result instantly in death. He used to point out to the careless urchin that if the little animal he pursued forgot a single thing that he had learned or made a single error in his judgment, he would not live a day. The human lout could blunder on and live, but not so the rabbit in the meadow or the gray squirrel in the tree top.

What the horse has learned he knows. You can trust him to remember. He will not forget. And on this night in early autumn my uncle trusted to his horse. There was a profound sense of understanding between Abner and his horse. It had its base, I think, in the fact that my uncle never deceived the horse. He acted always with him as one would with a man of honor. He kept always the word and the gesture of his promise to him, with a strict accounting that was never permitted to relax.

The road ascended to a hilltop, winding in and out among the trees.

The horse with care followed it, although no detail of the way was visible. The threat of rain in the chill air became manifest in a patter on the leaves and the splash of a vagrant drop on Abner and the horse. But before it gathered into a steady downfall a light appeared, and presently, as though he had come out onto the level of a hilltop, the horse stopped.

The light was the gleam of a lantern in a stable, and presently at my uncle's call a man appeared.

He was a big man with stooped shoulders so marked that it gave him the aspect of a hump. He stood in the doorway with the lantern thrust out before him so he could see who it was that sat the horse yonder in the dark. The strained posture in the man was that of fear. He was startled and he was in fear. And for the moment, with the fear on him, he was silent. Then, when he knew who came, the aspect of fear fell from him like a garment. For a moment there were immobility and uncertainty on the man; then, as on the instant, an idea, vaguely at the back of his mind, advanced and seized him. He stood up like one who, fearing a menace, finds a blessing at his hand.

"Abner!" he cried. "Light off, and let me put away your horse. I am glad to see you."

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"Brant," replied my uncle, "you may not be glad to see me, for I do not come in peace."

My uncle's words sounded distant and detached in the dark. But the man took only a casual notice of them. He was ridden by the idea in his mind.

"I know, Abner," he answered with a laugh. "I owe you a little money. But we will not quarrel over it. . . . Light off."

It was a term in the hills taken from the Scriptures. And it was a common form of greeting when one rode in and the host came out in welcome.

My uncle did not reply. The rain was beginning to fall. He got down and led the horse into the stable, removed the saddle, bedded him down and fed him. And as he went out he passed his hand over him, as in a manner of caress.

He did also a further thing: as he passed the bin from which he had taken out the corn for the horse, he put down a piece of silver on the lid. In the dark Brant would not find it. But it would be there for him when the light came. Then he went out with the man to the house.

Brant went before with the lantern. It swung with the man's stride, and my uncle following looked carefully at the earth, lighted at Brant's feet. The rain was falling and the clay of the road was wet.

They came to the long portico before the old house and went in. There was no light anywhere about the house, for the man's wife had gone back to her people and was dead; and by the mercy of God, as the country said it, there were no children. No Negro would live here and the farm hands could be hired only for the day.

The man was impecunious and mean; a hard master and one not to be endured; and with that larger vice, a courage to take where a value could be taken and not count the cost, if his cunning could find a way. And yet withal he did not prosper. He was in debt, and among his creditors he owed my uncle.

Brant stopped a moment on the portico and looked out toward the west.

He was motionless and the light now unmoving lay about his feet. Then he turned with an intake of the breath that in the silence was clearly audible. It was like the act of one in some anxiety or of one who waited on an event that might make or mar him.

Then he lifted the latch and went in.

He carried a lantern of that old type that the peddlers used to sell, made of tin and punched with holes, with a candle in it. He took out the candle and lighted some others about the room. They were the tallow candles of the time, in the flat tin candlestick that the peddler carried also in his pack. They were cheap, and here in Brant's house they were uncleaned and coated over with old grease.

He placed them on a table and went over to the fireplace. There was a blackened log in it and some half-

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burned embers. He raked them together, added some bark from a wood box on the hearth and lighted them with the candle. Then he stood up.

"Abner," he said, "you will have some supper?"

"No," replied my uncle. "But while you eat I will stand here by the fire."

He came over to the chimney and spread out his hands to the flame. It was cold, as I have written, and he was damp from the rain.

It was late for the evening meal in the hills, for men got up with the dawn and lay down with the dark, as, from all evidence, Nature intended them to do. Brant took my uncle's answer to mean that he had eaten, but this was not the fact. The meaning behind Abner's negative had a larger purpose. It was an old, deep-seated feeling in our fathers that they would not eat in a house to which they did not go in friendship as a guest, unless it was a public house in which they could pay down for the service.

The man went out to the kitchen with his candle and my uncle remained standing before the fire. It caught, crackled and flamed up, and with the two candles on the table the room was in a manner lighted.

It was a big old room of an ancient house, with windows of small panes looking toward the west; the direction from which my uncle had ridden up; the direction toward which Brant had turned about for that tense moment on the portico. It was a low room with the long poplar rafters visible. They had been whitewashed in an earlier time and the flakes of lime had scaled off and fallen. There was a worn rag carpet on the floor, some ancient chairs and a table. The table stood midway of the room before the fire, and among the litter on it was a German Bible.

It was an old and notorious ornament; a piece of ancient furniture, well known in the neighborhood. It had been brought in by the first Brant on a pack horse when he crossed the mountains from the east, and carried out of Europe in a sailing ship. It was a massive book with a brass clasp and a lock.

It was, as I have written, a piece of furniture, for it had remained, locked, there on the table for all time that any one in the neighborhood could remember. It was a gibe at Brant that he never opened it, and it was a common gossip. A comment on it did not escape old Adam Bird in his direct and drastic sermons: "As Brant kept the Word of God shut in with a lock in this world, so would Satan keep Brant shut in with a lock in the world to come."

There were no indirections in the sermons of old Adam Bird.

"Do you hint at me?" one had said to him. And he replied, "I do not hint at you, sir; I name you by name!"

And so he had named Brant by his name when he spoke of his locked Bible. But the Bible was sometimes opened, for the key had come down with the book; at his wife's death, when they had brought her back for burial, Brant had unlocked it for the preacher.

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Two things about the room drew my uncle's attention as he stood before the fire. This ancient Bible on the table was one of them and the other was a long-barreled deer rifle on two dogwood forks above the fireplace.

Abner looked up at the rifle and moved closer to it. His face became grave. The deep lines came out. In the gleam of the fire it was a face of bronze. He reached up and took the rifle down, turned it over, fingered it a moment about the hammer and replaced it on the dogwood forks. He turned then toward the Bible on the table; an aspect of it caught his eye. He went over to it with a definite purpose. It was locked, but nevertheless he was able with some difficulty to accomplish the thing he had in mind.

He returned now to the fire.

But the aspect and the manner of the man were changed. He was no longer in that deep reflection, detached, puzzled, as when in the dark, he had trusted for the highway to his horse. He stood now before the fire, his hands behind him, his face lifted, his lined features firm and resolute.

He was hardly back in this posture before the fire when Brant entered. He came in with his candle from the kitchen, snuffed it out between his fingers, replaced it in the tin lantern on the hearth and went over to the window that looked out across the portico to the west. He peered out; his big body doubled over.

"What do you look for, Brant?"

The man started and stood up.

"Why, nothing, Abner," he replied. "I would see if the rain comes."

"If you look only for the rain," said Abner, "you will find it. It comes. It is here."

It was in fact come with an increasing vigor. It pattered on the roof and ran off into the gutters. And my uncle added to his words:

"But sometimes, Brant, a man will look for a thing that does not come. Chance, as men say, thrusts in, or the providence of God prevents it. . . . Do you believe in the providence of God, Brant?"

For a moment the man looked quietly at my uncle before the fire at the end of the half-lighted room. Then there came a gleam of some resolution in his face.

"I don't know, Abner," he said. "But if it sent you to my house tonight I am ready to believe in it."

"Believe in it, then," replied my uncle, "for it surely sent me to your house."

Brant turned back into the room. He made a gesture as of one who dismisses a thing of no importance.

"And I am glad to see you, Abner. I live alone and the neighbors are not friendly. I am glad to see you, even if you come to collect a debt. It is an honest debt, for I bought the heifer of you and gave my due bill for the price. And I will pay it if you will wait a little. Not long, Abner — not long. I shall have the money for you soon. Times are hard. The meadows have been dwarfed by drought. There is

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only half a crop of hay, and the pasture is light. It will be a hard winter we go into. But you hurt me, Abner, when you say like old Adam Bird that you do not come in peace. A debt is no matter for a quarrel. One may overlook the tirades of old Adam, stamping about his pulpit, for there is no one of us exempt from his indictments. He has included me on more than one occasion; damned me, Abner, and set apart a place in hell for me. But he cannot send me to that selected place."

"He cannot. But there is one who can."

"What one?" said Brant.

"Yourself," said Abner.

Brant laughed. But it was the sort of laughter that did not reach within him. He glanced over his shoulder toward the window. But there was only the dark outside and the rain. If he looked for something through that window it did not arrive.

The thing did not escape my uncle. But he was silent, and Brant went on.

"Old Adam is an intolerable nuisance. Why should we put up with his vitriol tongue? If he were a younger man he would be called to account. His hymn book would not save him. There is no license in a preacher to vilify a citizen. One could have the law on him for his abuse."

The man ran on as though he talked to gain time in which to consider some vital thing. And at his words there came a grim smile over my uncle's features.

There came as in a picture the old circuit rider haled into the circuit court for slander. It would be a scene worth traveling far to see, and it would crowd the court room and the road outside; from every quarter the people would travel in. They would come early in their wagons, as to the county fair. There would be miles of horses. It would be an event without a parallel. And with one like Brant to bring the action, it would be an event incomparably dramatic. And a debacle in its issue.

No judge in Virginia could control old Adam before that audience. He would turn the court into a meeting-house, the bench into a pulpit. No earthly power could stop him. He would be, in his conception in such a case, the prophet of the Lord and above all temporal authority. The judge could not lock him up. He could with dignity do one thing only, withdraw and leave the old man to preach his sermon. And if Brant had been flecked with a whip before, he would now be scourged with a scorpion.

But these words of the man were idle, to cover another purpose. He talked to give himself time for a decision. And he approached it with what he now came to say.

"Where is Randolph; at his house or on a journey?"

It was a query that my uncle did not expect.

He looked down at Brant, for there was something in the man's face that puzzled him. Did he wish that Randolph might be absent? Did he fear

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him? Did he on the contrary hope for something from him? With all that Abner knew on this tragic night, this inquiry seemed a strange one to make. He gave the answer with his eye on Brant.

"Randolph will be at his house tomorrow."

My uncle was astonished at the answer.

"Tomorrow," said Brant, "we will both go to him."

There was a sudden gust of rain against the window, and Brant turned, looking over his shoulder. But there was nothing to be seen through the window.

"Why should I go with you?" Abner said.

"Because you are here," replied Brant. "And I am glad you came to see me, Abner," he added.

And he was pleased. There could be no doubt about it.

"Abner," he said, "from which direction did you come?"

"From the west," my uncle said.

"You would pass, then, near Nathan Arnold's house?"

"Yes."

"It is time he should be back with the money for the cattle that he drove overland to Baltimore. He would owe you, Abner, as he owes me and the others."

He hesitated before he added his final sentence.

"Did you by chance meet him on the way?"

"No."

"Was there anyone in his house?"

"There was no one in his house," replied my uncle, "and I came on here."

Brant leaned back in his chair, like one escaping from a pressure. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs far down. He passed his big hand over his face.

My uncle observed him closely. The relief in the man at his reply was clearly obvious.

But he gave no sign that he had observed the change, and he added:

"The house seemed empty. Arnold's wife, I believe, is on a visit to her father over the mountains."

"Yes," said Brant. "It is a long journey, but he should be back, Abner, with the money."

He referred to a custom in the hills. A cattleman would make up a drove to go overland to Baltimore, purchasing his bullocks from the graziers, and he would pay with the money he brought back from his sale. There was no adequate way to transport money by drafts and checks, and so the cattleman carried back the money with him.

Brant rose. He walked about the room. And as he walked he looked out through the windows toward the west.

Abner knew what was moving in his mind.

"Do you look for a light, Brant?"

The man pulled up with a jerk; his face startled.

"A light?" he said. "Why should I look for a light?"

"Well," replied my uncle, "you might be looking for a light in Ar-

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nold's house. It is time, as you have said, for him to be home from Baltimore, with the money for the cattle. If he arrived in the night he would set a candle burning."

Brant's face cleared.

"I was not looking for a light in Arnold's house."

Then my uncle said:

"Arnold will not be in his house tonight."

"Not in it tonight!"

Brant repeated the words as one puts out his hand in the dark.

"No," replied Abner, "he will not be in tonight. He was in the house this evening, but he has gone away."

"Were you at the house?"

It was a sharp, incisive query.

"Yes," continued Abner, "I stopped there to see if Arnold had returned, and if so to get the money for the cattle I had sold him. He was not in the house. But he had been in it."

"How do you know that?"

"I knew it for several reasons," Abner went on. "The window to the sitting room was pushed up and open, where he had forced an entrance, for the house had been closed in his wife's absence, and Arnold likely had no key to it; there were some dishes on a table in the room, and some fragments of food where he had eaten, and a kettle on the hearth."

"You were in the house then?" said Brant.

"The door was not fastened," replied my uncle. "I called when I rode up before the house. There was no reply, although I could see that someone had come in. Then I noticed the open window and some tracks in a flower bed before it. I got down and went into the house. Arnold had been there, from the evidences that I have mentioned. But he was not now in the house; and from a certain other thing I thought he would not be back in it."

"What thing?" said Brant.

"A thing," continued Abner, "that had a marked significance. The tin box in which Arnold kept his notes and deeds and which used to sit on a shelf above the mantelpiece had been taken down and the contents sorted over for any note or other evidence of value. Clearly he did not intend to return."

He paused and looked Brant steadily in the face.

"Where did he go?"

"How should I know, Abner?"

"Well," replied my uncle, "you were at Arnold's house before I was."

"How do you know that?"

"There was a shower of rain late this afternoon. Your footprints were clearly visible in the wet dust. You arrived at Arnold's house after that shower of rain. But Arnold was before you. He was in the house before the rain fell. There were his footprints in the soft earth of a flower bed, under the window that he had to force up before he could get into the house. Those footprints had been made in the dry earth, and therefore before the rain shower. I know Arnold's footprints, as anyone would know them, for he has a clubfoot."

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"But how did you know my footprints?"

"I did not know them," continued Abner, "until I walked behind you from the stable here, in the rain, tonight. But there was a track of a horse leading from Arnold's house this way, and I followed that. You were only a little way before me, Brant, and it was nearly night."

My uncle was watching carefully for the effect of this speech on Brant.

And now to his amazement the man laughed.

"Abner," he said, "you are correct in your conclusions. But you have unearthed no mare's nest, and you have discovered nothing that I did not intend to tell you. I was at Arnold's house this evening. I saw him, and I came home. Let me go back a little. Did I not say that I was glad to see you when you came; and did I not say that we would go together in the morning to see Randolph? There was a reason for that, Abner; a deep and moving reason."

He sat down now, behind the table where he had been standing.

"You were right, Abner," he went on, "to conclude that Arnold had gone away and would not return. He has done that very thing; and he has left us all in a lot of trouble. . . . I will tell you what I know, and tomorrow we will go to Randolph. Arnold owed me for a few steers, as he owed you and other men for his drove. I needed this money to pay you and I was looking out for Arnold to come back, and so, today, as I was near his place, I rode in. I found Arnold in his house. He was sorting out some papers from his tin box and he was terribly disturbed. He made no mystery about it. He said that on his way home over the mountain he had been robbed.

"The money for the cattle had been taken from him. He did not know what to do. He had come on home to talk the matter over with his wife. But as she had not returned, he had made up his mind to go to her at her father's place in Maryland. He had no money with which to pay us for the cattle. But he would take what securities he had that could be used to raise money; and as his wife's people were persons of property and influence, they might be able to help him find the money to pay for the cattle.

He begged me to say nothing. He would slip out over the mountains to his wife's people. No one would know he had been here, and he would return just as soon as he could raise the money."

Abner did not move.

"And so," he said, "Arnold has disappeared."

"That was his intention, Abner, to slip out of the county. You were there after I came away. If you did not find him he has disappeared."

"Then," replied my uncle, "he has disappeared more mysteriously than any man that I have ever heard of, for he was not in the house and there was no track of either the man or his horse outside."

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"That might be, Abner," Brant said. "In his panic and with such a resolution, it is possible that Arnold tied his horse out somewhere, and came across the fields to his house. He would keep out of the roads. There was no track of a horse when I came to the house. In fact, I came, as one might say, by chance. I was after a pronged buck that had been foraging in my corn, and I followed it through the woods. Then when I came in sight of Arnold's house I rode in."

"Did you get a shot at the buck?"

"No," said Brant. Then as though something had occurred to him too late, he brought his hand swiftly across his mouth.

My uncle seemed to take no notice of the gesture.

"Did you see Arnold's horse?"

"No."

"It was not in the stable, then, when you went there to look?"

"How did you know I went to the stable?"

"There was your track," said Abner, "leading from Arnold's gate to the stable and back again to where your horse stood."

"That is right, Abner," he said. "I did not see anyone about when I rode in, and so I walked over to the stable when I got down. But the door was closed."

My uncle turned a little and was looking up at the rifle on the forks above the fireplace.

"And so you missed the buck," he said.

"Yes. It was a long shot." Then he corrected the reply, brought up by a memory. "That is to say, Abner, I did not get a shot at the buck, as I told you. But I did shoot to turn him out from the gap to the mountains. It was a long shot at the butt of a shagbark hickory to make a racket to the east of the gap."

My uncle's thoughts were evidently in another quarter, for he took his wallet out of his pocket and began searching through the papers in it.

Brant watched him, and also covertly he watched the windows toward the west.

Abner presently found the thing he sought, replacing the wallet in his pocket. Then he came over to the table and put it down.

"Here is your due bill, Brant, for $300," he said. "I would like you to take it up."

"I can't take it up," replied the man.

But my uncle was obdurate. He was hard now and determined in his manner, and he insisted on the payment of the note. Brant made every form of apology, but it did not move him. If Brant had no money then he must give him something else of value for it. And finally as though driven into a corner the man made the offer that my uncle seemed to wish.

"I have no money," he said, "but I will give you anything else I have."

"I am determined to have it," replied my uncle, and his voice was hard and cold as a piece of metal. "And I accept your offer, Brant. I will take something for my note."

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His eyes rested on the table.

"I will take the Bible."

At the words Brant burst out with and oath and darted forward.

"Not that, Abner," he cried, "not that, in God's name!"

"And why not?" replied my uncle, his voice still cold and hard. "It is of no value to you."

"But it is!" cried Brant. "It is! It is! You can take anything else, Abner, but not that."

The shaken man was in a very panic of concern.

But my uncle remained cold and hard.

"It is a locked Bible," Abner went on, "the locked Bible that has brought you into criticism. The locked Bible on which old Adam Bird preached his sermon. You never open it — at least you never open it except at a time of death — as when your wife was buried. At a time of death, Brant. Why are you concerned about it?"

The man strove to get some measure of control.

"Why, Abner," he said, "it belonged to my father and his father's father. I could not part with it. It is all they have left me out of death."

My uncle repeated the word in his cold, even voice.

"Death! It is death that gives that book a value to you."

For a moment he was silent. Then he went on in that strange level voice.

"There was One born in a manger. Candles are sometimes used in His service and this Book is the record of Him. Think of it, Brant, the candle and the Book and the manger!"

"What do you mean, Abner?"

"They are symbols of life, Brant, and you have made them symbols of death! Listen to me: I rode in to Arnold's house. It was nearly dark. I knew Arnold had been there from the evidences I have told you and I knew that someone else had been there and had ridden away a few minutes before I arrived, for there were the tracks in the wet earth leading from the house to the stable and returning to where the horse had been hitched.

"There was something peculiar about these tracks. The footprints going toward the stable from the house were deeply imprinted in the wet earth of the road, and parallel, while the ones returning were one before the other and less deeply imprinted. This meant that the one going to the stable had been carrying something heavy, which he had not carried back. I went into the house.

"I could not find Arnold although he had surely entered. The oval rag-carpet rug by the table where Arnold had been sitting was also gone — the outline of it on the dust of the floor was clearly visible.

"Why had Arnold vanished, and this carpet rug, and what was the heavy burden that had been carried to the stable? I went to the stable. It was closed, as I have told you. But, as I did not tell you, I unfastened the door and went in. I found Arnold's horse tied in a stall, and still farther on, set deep in a manger where no

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current of air would disturb it I found a long tallow candle burning. It was set in the hay and had just been lighted. The end of the manger beyond it was packed and tramped down with hay, although there was no animal in that stall to be fed. I took out the hay, and under it at the bottom of the manger was Arnold's dead body, shot through the heart and wrapped in the carpet rug.

"The thing was clear now; Arnold had come home with the money for the cattle, someone had come along the row of bushes before the house, observed him through the open window, shot him from this ambush — for here was the mark of a rifle butt in the wet earth beside the footprints — robbed him, rifled his tin box, hidden the body and the bloody carpet in the stable, and set a lighted candle to fire the building later on, when the assassin should be safe.

"I did not know who this assassin was, but the track of the horse led toward your house, and, as you owed me for the heifers on your due bill, I came on here. I watched your footprints, as we came in the rain from the stable, and it was the same footprint that I had seen at Arnold's house. I found your rifle lately fired and with the stock wet. I found you watching for the light from the burning barn. And I found you glad to see me; not for any reason you have given, but because you would have a witness to your alibi."

"But you had invoked too many symbols, Brant! What had you done with the money? There was the manger and the candle. Then I noticed the Bible on the table. The locked Bible. The Bible you open only at death. It had been opened, for there were fresh key scratches about the brass lock, and the covers were bulged as though it had been closed with difficulty. I examined it.

"And so I found where you had hidden the money! As though, Brant — as though one symbol had led on to another. The manger, the candle and the Book!"

There was a moment of utter silence, then Brant slipped around the table to the hearth and, whipping down the rifle from the forks above the fireplace, struck at my uncle, a swift terrific blow.

And it was a miracle that my uncle could evade it. But perhaps he had divined what the man was at, for he did evade it by a snap of his body backward. And as Brant passed in the momentum of his murderous intent, Abner struck him with a short drive upward of his clenched left hand. There was the whole weight of my uncle's body in it. It caught Brant squarely on the angle of the jaw and he went down in a heap on the floor.

The blow of the clubbed rifle missed my uncle. But it struck the Bible on the table. It was a terrific blow, for it burst the brass clasp and broke the covers and the lock. The book leaped open, and the money and the notes and papers of the murdered Arnold, concealed between the pages, fluttered out.

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AN EQMM "SPECIAL"

THE CURSE OF STONEWALL JACKSON

by WILL STANTON

EVERYONE WHO'S GONE BY SO FAR has glanced in," said the tall, pale-haired young man as he let the curtain fall back across the window. "In a refined and well-bred manner, naturally." The young man crossed the darkened room and sat down. "Wondering what's going to happen, I daresay — and worried, too. Well, I can't blame them." He fitted a cigarette into his silver holder. "Of course you realize, Turner, that I am going to break the will." He lit the cigarette, stared at the match for a moment, and tossed it on the rug.

"Are you, Gerald? I doubt it," said the older man, shaking his head. "I've drawn a good many wills in my time; I've never seen one broken." He leaned over, picked up the match, and dropped it in an ashtray. "Takes evidence, you know — wishful thinking won't do it."

"Too bad," murmured Gerald, closing his eyes. "Have to prove Uncle Matt was insane — something like that, I suppose." He sighed. "I wasn't here when he died, you know." There was a faint note of regret in his voice. "Maybe you'd like to tell me about it."

Turner was watching the younger man coldly. "I doubt if there's anything you don't know. He was taken very suddenly — the doctors were unable to agree on a diagnosis."

"Yes. Some rather odd symptoms though, from what I could gather." Gerald paused for a moment, running his tongue across his lips. "Got a little violent toward the end, I understand. Frothing at the mouth —"

"It's no good, Gerald. I drew your uncle's will more than four years ago — no question whatever that he was of sound mind. In fact —"

"In fact, right up to the last few days." Gerald nodded wisely. "Still, no telling what a good lawyer might make of that. These mental afflictions, you know, as often as not they're not recognized until the last stages." He got to his feet and strolled over to an old table in the corner of the room. There was a small card fastened to the top of it.

"*Cherry Writing Desk*," he read. "*Thought To Have Been Used By John Hancock*." He flicked the edge of the table with his finger. "What do you suppose he paid for this? Five hundred — a thousand?" Turner was still regarding him with a cold stare.

"Now, here's something I remember. *Salt Box, Said To Have Been The Property Of Millard Fillmore.* Yes, 350 he paid for that." He turned with a satisfied smile, "Sound mind,

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I think you said, Turner? Well, we'll see."

"Yes, I think we will, and you won't like it." Turner was speaking slowly, with an awkward sincerity. "People in these parts have a certain respect for tradition — for the past. Anything they feel to be a part of their heritage —" He shrugged. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Ancestor worship? You seem to forget I was raised on it." Walking back to his chair, Gerald slumped down in it as if exhausted. "I can understand it all right. I can see why they'd want to turn this place into a museum — can't think what else it might be good for." With a tired wave of his hand he dismissed the room, the antiques, and the decadent society they represented. "Pretty expensive, of course, but then Uncle Matt had lots of money. I suppose the endowment will take care of everything — might even be a little something left over, eh, Turner?"

Turner's face was expressionless. "You overlook the fact that your uncle's wish in this matter —"

"Forget it. You overlook the fact that my uncle is dead. And if you and your cronies think you can perpetuate his lunacy with my money —"

"Let me clear up one point, Gerald. When you speak of your money you want to keep in mind that it consists of 5,000 a year held in trust for you. Any other ideas you may have are wishful thinking, and you might as well forget them."

"That would be convenient, wouldn't it?" snapped Gerald, dropping his cigarette on the floor and grinding it savagely with his heel. "Just like the old days — we must all work together to get Gerald out of the way, pack him off to school, send him to Europe, anything to keep him from disgracing the family name. Well, now I *am* the family name! Mull that over for a bit."

"I can't force you to leave, Gerald, I can only advise it very strongly."

"Yes, you can do that." The younger man got up and began wandering around the room. He appeared all at once to be in a good humor. "What's this — something new?" He had stopped beside an old and broken-down upholstered chair. "Not even a card on it — only some initials here on this doily. *B.F.* — General Bedford Forrest, I suppose. No. Benjamin Franklin then? Yes, I rather like that. Not a Southerner, of course, or even a gentleman, but still — too bad there's no card. *The Spots On This Chair Believed To Be Ink Spilled While Writing Poor Richard's Almanac.* How does that strike you?"

"It was the last purchase your uncle made," Turner said quietly. "It was delivered here the very day he was stricken."

"Really! I must treat it with added respect." Gerald stretched out a slender hand to the head-rest and delicately plucked away a long gray hair. "Delightful!" He gazed at it for a moment and absent-mindedly began to wind it around his finger. "Tell me something, Turner, when a

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will has been broken, how long is it before the new heir can take possession?"

"You might as well put it out of your mind, Gerald."

"I'll have to hire a couple of men, I suppose, and a truck." He was pacing nervously up and down, his voice eager and excited. "We'll pack up all this and drive out to the city dump. What a treat to watch the sanctimonious citizens when we start heaving out the tables and chairs. *One Comforter Said To Have Been Used By Lady Baltimore And Companion* —"

"That's enough, Gerald. You've obviously been drinking."

"Drinking?" The younger man laughed suddenly. "No, I've found something better."

"What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter?" The corner of Gerald's mouth was beginning to twitch. "I don't know — too much sun at that damned cemetery perhaps. My nose feels as if it's on fire." He rubbed one hand over his face and glanced around the room.

"Who was it slept here? Jeb Stuart — Lighthorse Harry? That's all got to be changed, you know. Going to be a different class of people sleeping here from now on." The younger man swallowed painfully. It was becoming more difficult for him to form his words. "Too bad about that — what do you call it? — endowment. Yes, that would be a nice, juicy plum for somebody, and whose fat little thumb do I see in the pie?" His body was seized with a convulsive shudder, and without further warning he pitched forward on the floor.

"Get up, Gerald! You're either drunk or you're mad!"

"Keep away from me, Turner." Gerald had risen to his knees. Fumbling awkwardly, he unwound the gray hair from his finger and held it up to his temple so that one end fell to his shoulder. "You touch one hair of this gray head —" he giggled foolishly, his body trembling.

Turner was watching him, a growing bewilderment in the lawyer's eyes. "That was what Matt said — his last words — *Who touches a hair . . . of . . . yon . . . gray . . . head . . .*"

EDITORS' NOTE: *Will Stanton's story has no doubt reminded you of John Greenleaf Whittier's famous poem, "Barbara Frietchie," which you probably have not thought of since your school days. "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head. But spare your country's flag, she said" — remember? And remember, too, that it was Stonewall Jackson who, stirred by Barbara Frietchie's word and deed, uttered the curse: "Who touches a hair of yon gray head Dies like a dog!" True, the entire incident as used by Whittier has no basis whatever in historical fact; but surely you will agree that it has served Mr. Stanton exceedingly well as the springboard for a perfectly delightful bedtime story!*

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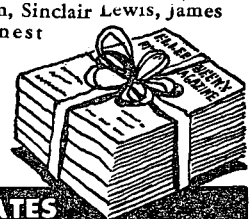

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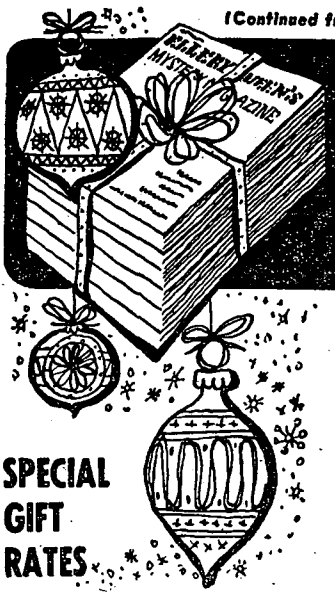

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